UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

BODILY FUNCTIONS

BY

TRACY L. BENKENDORF

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fufillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of graduate studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Bodily Functions submitted by Tracy Lynn Benkendorf in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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Dale Wilkie
D. Wilkie

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J. Defelice

December 13, 1993

If we had forever, we would not treasure those small gestures that transform moments into memories.

This work is dedicated to my parents, and
to Barry and John.

I would like to thank Kay Stewart and Greg Hollingshead.

Also, I would like to thank Robert Solomon, for his early encouragement.

Bodily Functions is a short story collection and thus, by definition, consists of a series of individual fictions; although the majority of the stories are not linked through structural techniques, such as recurring characters or replicated settings, the works are certainly connected thematically. All of the narratives concern themselves with the unique nature of selected male/female relationships within the social landscape that defines the end of the twentieth century. Characters of several generations can be seen struggling to make sense of a world where experience suggests that old stereotypes, and barriers to communication between individuals - especially between men and women - persist despite political and scientific advancements. Yet most of these stories are far from being as serious as such an approach might suggest. In contrast, there is an obligatory amount of seriousness and much humour. The reader is reminded that these accounts are fictional and that the characters and situations reported are, therefore, invented.

Contents

April 6, 1992 1

Insta - Fix: That's Truth 2

Sure Thing 21

Elevator Overture 30

Bodily Functions 39

Smooth As Wallpaper 45

Underground 57

Stupid Love Poem 90

April 6, 1992

The shriek of a gull pierces the unevenly draped mist
hovering over a restless lake,
sweeping and swirling
the waves restlessly trying to break
the synchronicity
that defines the difference between
predictable patterned movement
and a sudden rush of breaking free.

The last ray of light rifles through frothy crests and
mirrors of pink amber strike the valleys
a final ditch effort to illuminate the sheer darkness
that wants to blanket the lake
and smother the gull - make everything blurry.

The indigo water features a silhouette, vibrating
perched upon the edge
- the static boundary where solid and fluid meet
and caress each other unknowingly.
The silver of a smile flickering,
washed up on the sand and then cast out
into the bouncing, bobbing oblivion.

The silhouette of a woman loses its spotlight-
Lungs left to breathe the thick, choking blackness,
sputter blindly into the biting wind
that used to bear caressing whispers,
that used to penetrate the outer shell
and fill the inner core with exhilarating perfumes.

A loon calls to her across the slurrings of the lake,
but her fibers are dead to the sound.
The waves grab for her ankles, caress her thighs,
flirt with the small of her back-
she feels the wetness on her fingertips,
arches her back so that her hair is half in, half out,

She thinks she wants to stop it, wants to steal herself
from the grasp of the water
but the house is empty, the closet looks strange and
the carpet's unfaded where his study chair used to be.

The iciness has already saturated her
and left her with a dumbness more numbing
than the shock that dulled the piercing pain-
again, the cry of the loon ricochets off the
teasing turbulence, snipers the rocky crevasses.

It is too late - she has pierced the heart of the lake
and the blood of a lifetime surges beneath its surface.

Insta - Fix: That's Truth

I live behind my brother's fraternity house in a four bedroom walk-up. My brother and his brothers, they're good for a laugh every now and then. They'll have outdoor hot tub parties in the middle of December, and if I check my window around 2 a.m. I can usually see some howling drunk do a running jump into some demented form of half-naked body surfing. Yes, slapping around in the snow like a seal on Demerol - that requires university training. And of course those guys have their fights too. Big frat scraps out on the front lawn, fights with other fraternities I mean, usually over pretty much nothing, but always met with beer and enthusiasm and the occasional piece of patio furniture. My brother once caught something across the nose and needed five stitches and you can just bet he paraded that scar around like a new girl or something.

This guy named Jimmy Edwards lives over there with my brother. What they do to him, well, it's kind of a howl in a way I guess. I mean I get a kick out of seeing him go flying by with no shoes on, just ripping through the puddles and everything. See, Jimmy has these outstanding speeding tickets and the cops pop by every now and again, trying to nab him on them. But the guys in the house, they knock on Jim's door and say, "Hey, Edwards, the cops are here," and while the cops are out front Jim shoots out the back like an eight ball off a stick. My brother says it's gotten to be a thing with

the guys, and half the time Jimmy will be off with his shirt unbuttoned when there isn't anybody out front at all - or maybe the doorbell will ring and it'll be the pizza guy. My brother said they got Edwards to jump into the trunk of a car once, because they were all out back unloading groceries when a police cruiser was just turning off the main drag. He said they slammed the trunk and got to playing baseball and forgot all about Dave until they were driving to the movie theatre later and heard all this banging like the spare tire had come loose. But I just think that part's crap, you know? Like I'm going to believe any old thing.

Most of the guys in the house, they're all right. I mean, I like them just fine. They like their parties and their secret handshake, but they study and follow politics and some of them are going places. Doug, he can get a little bit *too* friendly after a few beers, like he's never seen a woman in a jean skirt before, but the other guys are pretty cool. They don't like to get really high - not like one of my roommates. Her name is Twyla, but we call her Twilight Zone because she's so totally whacked out. A couple of weeks back she was candy-flippling, mixing acid and Ecstasy, throwing in a few vodka shooters for good measure. I've never been into drugs, but I could tell Twyla was fucked when she asked me if I was going to help her change into her riding outfit so she'd be ready for the final jump-off. I guess she used to ride or something back in Vegreville, before she got engaged. Her fiance, he's a farmer with red arms and cowboy boots and the personality of a carrot stick. But Twilight Zone, she thinks he's Tom Cruise, and that every female needs someone just like him to get her life on the right track, or cosmic plane or whatever. But she actually believes we all *want* him. He stays with us, I mean in our apartment, whenever he comes in from Vegreville, and Twyla actually thinks Carolyn wants to do the guy, pop him like a Midol or something. Carolyn's one of my other roommates, and she does parade around in a black sheer negligee a lot; I don't really notice it anymore. But it's not for the farmer's benefit and not for mine either. Carolyn isn't any lesbian. She's got this Spanish guy in her bed almost every night, and I know because her room's right next to mine and her headboard used to keep me up half the night, whamming against the drywall. It drove me crazy, you know.

And I did ask her to move the bed out, and she smiled all cutesy and said she would, but when the blamming kept on, well, I snuck in one day and loosened the bolts on the bed frame. And man, I was smiling that night. There was a crash to put the stock market to shame, and this horrible shriek. Judy, she's my sane roommate, she was out in the hallway, her face as white as her nightshirt, just freaking, thinking the floor had fallen out or something. Carolyn, she knew I'd done it, but she knew she had it coming, so she didn't say anything. I felt really bad for her a couple of weeks back though because when Twyla was candy-flipping she accused Carolyn of doing that on purpose to give everybody heart failure. Then Carolyn called her a bitch and Twyla called Carolyn a nymphomaniac, and then Twyla accused Carolyn of wanting Brent, and Carolyn, she just laughed so hard at that that Twyla had to punch her in the eye.

So anyway, after the fight there was a big ruckus with Twyla shooting off obscenities as usual, and Carolyn screaming she was half blind and going to sue if there were any broken blood vessels. And me, well, I didn't know what to do, so I just sat in the hallway flipping through Vogue magazine, half listening to both of them but not talking to either one. I just wanted to make sure a brawl didn't get started and end up in the kitchen with Twyla's fine china and Judy's microwave, and crystal and sharp implements flying every which way. If they did start up again, I'd be tempted to get my own shots in just to stop the screaming, and I'm bigger than both of them, so there were bound to be some broken blood vessels. And I'd have to break that one plate - the one with Raggedy Ann and Andy sharing an ice cream soda. I'd break it over both their heads. I mean, man, I just hate that plate. It's so gay.

So on Tuesday, Raggedy Ann and Andy, they're still hanging out and everthing's pretty much back to normal, or as normal as it gets around this place. And on Tuesday night I'm reading Moll Flanders, this novel about this trampy thieving woman. I'm reading this and there's this knock at the door and I get up to answer it with my eyes glued to this part where Moll's stealing this stuff from a burning house and the passages really speed up, and so I'm just thinking it's one of my roommates and they forgot their key. So I'm standing there and I open the lock and half turn away and then

the door just bolts open and this guy shoves me. I drop my book when this knife is shoved in my face and I look up at this guy, and he's like one of those movie rapists who you try to hate but he's got great eyes so you just think, well, it's only an actor, and man, I'd like to do that actor. But, I'm kind of scared then, so I just notice his great hair and say, "what the f-" but then he cuts me off and pushes me into the living room, onto the couch.

"Hey," he says, like we're just meeting on the bus.

I'm thinking, this isn't a tea party, bud, so I say, "Are you going to kill me or what?"

"Look, I've got a problem."

Yeah, well you're right about that. He wasn't going to graduate from charm school this way.

"I have to stay here for a bit. Everything'll be fine - just keep quiet, don't talk loud or anything - everything'll work out, I know." His eyes were sort of wide like a kid's, but his knuckles were white on the knife. He just sat there though, beside me, just like we were old pals. He didn't hold the blade up to my ear, like in the movies.

"What is it you've done?" I say.

"Oh, I ain't telling." He rubs one of his palms on his blue jeans and sort of half smiles.

"Oh yeah?" I say. He looked like a talker, was wearing an awesome black leather biker jacket. "You ride a bike?"

"Used to," he says. "Last week, this asshole, he took a spin on it and blew a gasket, so I can't ride it tonight - it's a Harley - just the best I ever had."

"Oh, yeah?" I know it sounds like I was stuck on repeat, but I was nervous. "So, did you steal something?" I say. Just keep them talking, that's what they always did on Hawaii Five-O re-runs (what did that Five-O or 5-oh mean anyway?)

"I ain't saying." Damn, but he was cute. He had these great dimples and hair like Christian Slater in Untamed Heart.

Anyway, so there I am, sitting on the couch with some looney, knife-wielding

babe when the door opens and Twyla comes sauntering in, five feet off the ground on mushrooms or something. I could tell because she saw the guy and just started giggling. She asked him why he was wearing rubber boots with his jeans tucked in - the guy was wearing deck shoes. She saw this quick enough and started giggling.

"So, who's this?" she says, twirling a piece of hair around her index finger. Her white blouse had something that looked like chocolate on the collar and there was lipstick on her nose. Drugs were sexy, she always said.

"Twyla, this is - this is-"

"I'm Ray," the guy says, tucking the knife under his leg.

So the phone rings then and I smile at them and get up to answer it. But the guy gives me a look and sort of tightens up, so I stay there. And things get really boring after that. I start reading Moll again, and Twyla goes for the shooter glasses - somehow she gets it into her head that this is Carolyn's date, though he's hardly her type - and gets the tequila from the cabinet over the cactus. Soon Ray's just loaded, we're talking pissed, and the knife is on the floor, and his hand is on Twyla's leg, and I just want to hurl.

"Carrot stick," I say.

"What?" Twilight Zone says, giggling into the tequila bottle.

"Brent. You know - our old country buddy?"

She laughs and says, "Oh, Tasha. The old country - I'm Ukrainian, you know, Ray. RayBan-"

After that, I got dressed and left. Twilight Zone, she's just way out there.

The lights were on at the frat house that night. It was around eleven-thirty when I knocked on the back door. This grey cat was hanging around the steps and both of us wanted inside. My brother's head popped out under his Blue Jays cap.

"Hi," he said, swinging the door wide.

"Hey, how are you doing?" I stepped over a heap of shoes as I made my way in behind the cat - I followed him around the corner.

"Oh, not bad I guess - I've got most of my stuff together." He took a drink from

his Coke can. My brother was leaving for Victoria the next day, to spend the summer with his girlfriend.

"Yeah? What time are you going?"

"Probably around six."

"A.M.?"

"Yeah."

"Gross."

"I want to get as much day driving in as I can - don't want to drive the mountains in the dark - I'm just watching tv downstairs." He looked toward the staircase. "Are you going out or anything?"

"No - I'll come down." The steps were sticky under my socks. "Anyone else around?"

He ducked under the clothesline with the sweater hanging on it, shot his Coke can into the garbage. "Nope. A bunch of the guys went to the Bronx - some of them finished exams today."

"Man, I'm jealous. I've got an eighteenth century lit exam left - I have to read two novels for Monday."

"Yeah. Only one left though. That's not bad."

"For you maybe, Mr. I've-packed-my-bag-and-I'm-getting-the-hell-out-of-this -looney-bin."

"Looney bin." He smirked and pulled at the neck on his t-shirt. The cotton was pulled tight over his chest and I remembered how some of the guys teased him about working out every day, calling him a pretty boy to piss him off. "Your roommates beating on each other again?"

"Twyla's just wasted and being an idiot with some stranger in our living room."

"That right? What do you mean, *some stranger?*"

Just then I wondered if Twyla hadn't set up the whole deal to scare the hell out of me. "I'm going to get that little froot loop."

"Tash?"

"Oh, never mind - what are you watching?"

Unsolved Mysteries was on, and it kind of gave me the creeps because there was this story about some boy who'd been missing since he was fifteen years old. Him and his buddies went partying at some cabin and the guy- his name was Scott Young - he got really wasted I guess, and went wandering out into the forest while everyone else hung out at the campfire drinking beer and smoking up. It was a pretty good re-enactment except for these people sitting around, moving back and forth and singing. They looked retarded sort of, not drunk. Anyway, this Scott guy was just trashed and his younger brother had been harassing him, telling him to take it easy on the booze, just before he wandered off (I still don't see why he'd go for a little trek into the bushes, but, oh well). By the time Scott became un-lost, and walked back, half the kids had gone home and the sun was up. So these friends of Scott's, goofs that they are, they decide to take advantage of Scottie's hangover by razzing him. Scott says he can't remember half the night, so they tell him he killed his own brother and buried him in the woods. And God knows why - I guess Scott's as confused as I am about why he was in the bushes - but Scott believes them (his brother must have really been in the outhouse) and takes off into the woods again. And he never comes back. Ever. Gee, good joke guys. Real funny.

So Unsolved Mysteries was just ending when there was this thumping and banging of feet on the staircase, and shouting and laughing.

"Hey, put that smoke out T.C., no smoking in the house," somebody yelled.

"Kiss my ass." (I'd guess this was T.C.)

"Would you guys shut up - I've got a psych exam tomorrow." This was a farther off voice with that caffeine panic tainting the words.

"Sorry, man," somebody said.

"Anybody got any beer left?"

"I told you to shut the fuck up!" Definitely too much caffeine.

"Sorry." Finally a group effort.

My brother looked at me, one eyebrow raised. "Are you going to stick around?"

"I don't know - maybe for a while."

Jerry Rooke and T.C. came in, followed by Kurt.

"Hey, Rookster," my brother said.

"Hey, Banks," Jerry said,sitting down between us on the couch. Him and my brother are best friends. "Hi, Tasha. What's going on?"

"Nothing much," my brother said, elbowing Jerry in the ribs.

"Watch the jacket." Jerry grabbed at my brother's cap, and they started wrestling, falling on to the floor.

"Good grief," I said. "Gentlemen, I present the offspring of advanced education."

T.C. started mumbling something about a smoke and patting his pockets. His wiry hair was messed up and he looked like Seinfeld's Kremer. Kurt stood back against the fooze-ball table, drinking a beer and smiling.

"So, Tasha, how were your exams?" Kurt said.

"Pretty good, so far. I've got one left."

"That's cool," he said. "I'm done - Hallelujah, thank the Lord." He held his beer up to the ceiling.

"I hate you," I said.

"Most people don't say that until they know me better," he said, smiling.

"Yes, well I'm very intuitive."

My brother and Jerry had separated and were lying sprawled on the carpet.

"You're useless, man," my brother said.

"You're a putz."

"You're a frigging drunk."

"That I am," Jerry said, crawling back to the sofa. "I'm about ready to crash."

"Where's Helen?" T.C. said.

"Who the fuck knows," Jerry laughed. Helen's his girlfriend of three years. I think they've broken up eight times.

T.C. was fiddling with some popsicle sticks on the bar top. He had some glue and was trying to glue their ends together. T.C.'s really artistic, actually, very talented.

He did a black and white sketch for our living room. But right then he looked pretty cross-eyed.

"So how was the Bronx?" I asked.

"It was hurting," Jerry said. "Filled right up with high school kids and first years. The band was good though. They're called the Cadillac Tramps."

"Yeah, I saw them in Calgary once," I said. "With Field Day."

"Hey, Banks," Kurt said. "Do you want a beer?"

"No," my brother said. "I'm going to crash right away."

"Oh yeah - going to see *Julia* tomorrow." Jerry faked a swoon.

"Don't start with me, you drunk."

"You want a drink, Tasha? Molson Dry?"

"Sure, why not."

"Final exam why not," my brother said. Kurt was already going upstairs for the beer.

"Go to bed, Banks," Jerry said.

"Go to de-tox," my brother said.

I laughed.

"I'm going out for a smoke," T.C. said, sauntering away.

"Real party animal, that guy," Jerry said. "Four beers and he can't entertain a thought."

"Sounds like Tasha's kind of guy," my brother teased. "Most of her boyfriends can't put two sentences together when they're straight."

"Oh, I'm going to *miss* you," I said.

After a while Jerry went upstairs to pass out, and my brother gave me a hug and told me to take care, and then went up to do the same thing. T.C. never came back down, so it was just me and Kurt in front of the tv with half a case of beer. Kurt's eyes were a little glassy from the beginning - though he made amazing sense for a drunk guy.

"You're graduating this year, aren't you?" he said.

"Yes, I am," I smiled. The first beer was making me feel warm. Kurt was sitting

against the couch with his legs outstretched. I moved down beside him.

"So what are you gonna do next year?"

"I've applied to law school."

"Yeah? I would have pegged you for a grad studies type."

"Oh, I've applied for that too, in English." I drank too big a mouthful and the beer fizzed in my nose.

"Cool," he said, leaning his beer on the inside of his thigh. I started wondering if he had good legs under those jeans. I already knew he had a nice butt.

"What are you doing for the summer?"

"I'm in spring session - I'm trying to get into business still."

"*Still*? I was realizing I knew almost nothing about this guy.

"Do you have a job?" he said.

"No, not yet. I'll be dealing with the bank of mom and dad for a while."

"That's O.K."

"That's right on," I laughed. "No account fees and no pay backs."

He smiled and kept his eyes on me. "Your hair looks nice," he said. "It looks different."

"Really - different?"

"Curlier or something."

Great, living with my psycho roommates was causing chemical alterations to occur in my body. They were affecting my hair structure. "It's probably just messy."

"It looks good."

"Thanks." The bottles in the case clinked as I took another beer.

It was one of those thin conversations, one of those transparent encounters that you know would just be great for a Trojan ad. Reduce the risk. One of those back and forth badminton type deals where one person shoots a question and the other returns - though it doesn't matter if it's a frail effort. Under half of my questions was *do you have a girlfriend? do you have your own room? do you have a fold out bed? what do you look like naked?*

After my fourth beer I was lying on my back, staring at the ceiling. "I wish I was outside," I said.

"What? Outside?"

"Yeah, looking at the sky."

"Well, come on then," Kurt said.

"What?"

"Let's go outside."

He was on his feet, pulling at my arm.

"Don't rip it off."

"I'm sorry." He was laughing.

"I like the sky, you know?" I was following him up the stairs. "It's the one part of the world people can't really touch. It always looks so untouched." That was my 'sensitive' line. I always seemed to say it when I was drinking.

"That's interesting," Kurt said. "Do you want to do some tequila shots? Outside?"

"Sure," I said. I was starting to feel really sluggish and peaceful. Like someone could just come up to me with a gun, and threaten to blow my head off and I'd just say, "Oh don't be silly - put that thing away. Silly."

So we went out back with the glasses and the bottle and sat on the damp grass in front of the row of parked cars, listening to people howling and laughing in the neighbourhood. There wasn't any lime, so the Tequila was sour and I only had a couple of shots. As I looked at Kurt there in the darkness he looked more and more cute to me, in a fuzzy kind of way. Down the alley, to our left, I saw the yellow-orange of a campus security vehicle.

"Campus Five-O," I said.

"Don't let them take me," Kurt grabbed my hand. "I didn't mean to do it, honest. The gun just leapt into my hand and all of a sudden I was Al Capone, and I just had to steal those knitting needles - good torturing devices - but it was a mistake. The little old lady's hair piece got in the way. The mothballs she wore, they were a power

aphrodisiac to me. I couldn't help myself."

"Oh, God," I said, trying not to burp. "A real live gangster." He didn't look like one of the Untouchables. His dark hair could be in a shampoo ad.

Kurt was looking at me. "Do you want to go inside?"

"O.K.," I said.

So we went into Kurt's room and the first thing I noticed were these model buildings. They were everywhere. Half-built structures of plastic and plexiglass and wood.

"I'm into architecture," he said. He closed the door and sat down on the side of the bed.

I remember how he kissed - it was so-so. One of those wet kissers, but with good tongue technique. I was lying there and he was on top of me, and things were cool, but then I must have fallen asleep or passed out or whatever because the next thing I knew Kurt was whipping me out of the bed, and my eyes were killing in the light. It was morning. I barely had my sweater on and he just kept saying, 'hurry up, hurry up, Tasha," like we were in the path of a nuclear missile. He practically hurled me off the back steps.

As I was walking home, I thought of my brother. I had this pain in my side, and this throbbing through my nose and my cheeks. A sinus headache with a side of instant lung disease or something. What could I have been thinking, fooling around with some guy in the house where my brother lived. I'd always hung around there, though, and nothing like that had ever happened. It had never been a temptation and it bugged me that Kurt was no longer one of the guys. He was *a guy*. And where did he get off just throwing me out like that?

The street was empty and the birds were chirping, but everything else was still. The corridor leading into my complex was deserted, and inside the apartment the drapes were pulled. Twyla was in a ball on the couch - alone, thank God. Carolyn's door was closed and so was Judy's. I went to my room and looked at the face of my digital. It was five-thirty. Five-thirty in the bloody morning. I dropped my purse on the floor and

crawled up from the foot of the bed to the pillow. It was the softest pillow I'd ever had under my head.

I woke up with a jerk and a kink in my neck - I mean I jerked awake. The phone was ringing. I had to stop the noise.

"Hello."

"Could I speak to Tasha, please?"

"Try the morgue," I said.

"What?"

"Speaking." I looked at the clock. It was 10 a.m.

"Hi, Tash. It's Kurt."

I rolled on to my side to the stripes on the pastel wall paper. "Oh."

"How are you doing?"

"Peachy."

"Look, I'm really sorry about this morning. It's just that I didn't want the guys to see. We're not supposed to date sisters of fraternity members, you know. And-"

"Is that what that was? A date?" I was smiling, but I didn't want him to know it.

"Tash - I know I was rude this morning. I just wanted to apologize-"

"Yeah?"

"Sure, and-"

"Why wasn't I wearing my sweater when I woke up?"

"Don't you remeber?"

"Not all of it - most of it. Oh, I don't know."

"Well, we sort of disrobed-"

"*Disrobed?*" I laughed. "Who's the English major here?"

"You're cute. It was nothing major. I was caressing your back and you fell asleep-"

Caressing? Who was this guy? "Oh," I said.

"So, how do you feel?"

"Terrible. I hadn't had any alcohol since reading week and now I remember why." I'd puked in a recycle bin after seeing Field Day in Calgary - it wasn't the band that was toxic.

"I know what you mean. What time did you get up?"

"I'm not up." I noticed my Cult Love tape was missing from the top of my tape deck. Victim to a twilight raid no doubt.

"Your brother's still here, you know."

"No, I didn't. How would I? Why isn't he gone?"

"I don't know. I think he's sick - Rooke, Jerry, he saw you leave today. He came into my room and said, "Kurt, you're a dead man."

"What?"

"Anyway, Jerry's going to keep quiet - nobody else at the house knows - I'm a pledge, and if the actives find out I'll have to bail - hell, I'll have to go to another school -"

"So, what you're saying is, what you've done is commit incest?"

"Don't be funny. I'm just trying to apologize."

"For what exactly?"

"Well, for this morning - the rest, well, you're over twenty-one - we're two adults - you wanted it as much as I did-"

"Wanted *what*? I thought you said nothing happened-"

"It didn't. I mean, it was the way I said."

"Kurt, you're going in circles."

"Do you still feel terrible?"

"Of course."

"Let's have lunch."

"What? No way - no way am I getting near food - I'm still in bed, Kurt. What's with this freaking ou-"

"O.K. Dinner then."

"What?"

"Say yes."

"Why?"

"Because it'll be fun. We'll both feel better."

"No, I'll feel better tomorrow."

"Tasha." He wasn't going to give up.

"All right. Just let me get back to sleep."

"See you at six?"

"Thirty."

"O.K. Six-thirty. Bye."

Adios. I set my alarm for four-thirty and went back to sleep. At five, I got up and had a shower. There was a note saying my brother had called while I was in the bathroom, but he'd gone by the time I returned the call. I blow dried my hair and put on some eye liner and some red lipstick and my Adrienne Vittadini jean skirt. I didn't feel like ironing so I pulled a black mock turtleneck out of the laundry. I put on some Giorgio perfume last. I wear perfume every day. If I forget, I feel naked.

Anyway, Kurt never showed up. I can't say I was surprised. I was pretty sure he was just protecting his ass until my brother left town. The little coward. *No dating of relatives*, he said. *We'll both feel better*, he said.

I ought to beat him up myself, the little shit. I walked around the apartment for a while. It was empty - of people, I mean. The psycho knifer guy didn't haul out the furniture or anything. I wondered what happened with him. I guess he just packed up his knife and headed off to some other stranger's home. Mr. Rayban. Man, that Twyla. I bet she did set me up; old Rayban man was probably a drug connection, one of her buddies. Twyla was definitely a head case. And hey, I hadn't seen Carolyn since Sunday. I wondered where the hell she was. Maybe Twyla stuffed her in a trash can or something.

I was standing in front of the sketch, the one T.C. had done for us, when the phone rang. Maybe it was Kurt, maybe he was just late,

"Hello?" Maybe he was just a little-

"Hi Tash." Shit.

"Hi mom."

My mom wanted a favour. My brother, he'd left the spare set of car keys at the frat house when he was moving - dimwit. And I just lived so close here, I wouldn't mind runnning over and getting them out of his old room, would I? No, I wouldn't mind. I'd love to go. I'd love to go bash Kurt in the brain. I told my mom it wouldn't be a problem.

I ate some cold pizza from the fridge and then walked across to the frat house at around seven-thirty. T.C. and some other guy were out back smoking and I saw them exchange a look as I passed by. The back door was wide open, so I could have just gone in, but Jerry Rooke was sweeping up some broken glass in the hall and he said, "Hi," all serious like. Him and my brother *were* best friends. Sort of put him in a tough spot, I guess. He could tell my brother, and my brother could be disgusted at me and break Kurt into spare parts, or he could keep his mouth shut and break the brotherly code of truth. Truth. What a riot. To thine own stick be true.

"Hi Jerry," I said.

"How're you doing?"

"Fine. You?"

"Fine." There was some pretty serious sweeping going on.

I was going to say something about the keys when these two guys I didn't know appeared in the hallway behind Jerry. They saw me and nudged each other.

"Hi," one grinned at me with a supermarket glance, sizing me up like a grade A turkey. He was wearing cologne for three.

Jerry whacked him on the shin with the broom. "You're standing right in the middle of my pile of-"

"Aw, go pop a Midol, Rooke." The guy's grin was just hovering there, stupidly, right in my face.

Like hell nobody knew. I didn't care if people knew I'd had sex, if I'd *had* it. But if I want sex, why does that still make me the bait? Why do people see it like the rabbit

and the fox, like I'd let up and given into the predator? Why couldn't I be the winner, the conqueror? Why couldn't people grow the hell up?

Why did I feel like I was going to vomit? "I've got to go," I said.

I went home without the keys and undressed and tried to sleep. There was nobody around to talk to, not even candy-flipping Twyla. She'd cheer me up, talking about her wedding. It cheered me up to hear of weddings because I could sigh happily knowing I wasn't going to be tossing my life out with any bouquet. I could just sit at my pew and cringe. I flipped around in my bed and wondered why I'd never tried drugs, and why Twyla was so into them. Oh yeah, her life's over, I reminded myself. Oh, yes. No need for brain cells.

At midnight I'd had enough. I got up and put my clothes on again and combed my hair. My lips were stained red in the mirror from old lipstick. They looked sexy, I thought. Oh, who cared. I walked out the door and went for the frat house. Again.

I knew the combination on the back door, so I opened it and went in. The kitchen light was on, but it was empty. The house was quiet except for some music coming from somewhere in the basement. The fridge kind of groaned when I went by. I went to my brothers old room and found the keys on the window sill.

As I was going by Kurt's room I noticed that there was a crack of light coming from between the door and the frame. I walked up close and pushed the door open and little more. Kurt was half-sitting, propped up against the wall on a pillow, a half-empty vodka bottle sitting on the night stand. He was snoring; wearing a towel around his waist.

I walked in and closed the door and went to the bed.

"Kurt," I said.

He just snored.

"Hey, Kurt." I pushed his shoulder a few times. "Hey."

He opened his eyes and squinted at me in a frown. "What? Natasha? What's-"

"We need to have a conversation," I said.

He straightened up a bit, rubbing his eyes.

"About your inability to comprehend the female mind. Or the human mind. Hell, maybe life in general."

"Look, Tasha," he looked totally out of it. He must have started drinking in a panic in the early afternoon. "I don't want a relationship. I just broke up with my girlfriend a few months ago - and I don't-"

"Where do you get off assuming *I* want a relationship? Where do you get these stupid ideas.? You thought I'd tell my brother that, didn't you? You thought I was pissed off because-"

"Tasha. Shhhhhhhhh. I broke up with my girlfriend. And with *us*, well there's no spark, you know?

Was the man an idiot? A deaf idiot? "Good grief, Kurt-"

"I don't feel good, Tash." He looked puce. Not green, but puce.

"Yeah, well, you look pretty bad too."

"Can you get me some water, please?"

"Christ, man-"

"Please, Tash?"

I went to the kitchen for the water. I hate people whining at me, you know. Anyway, when I walked back, like two minutes later - I had to wash a glass - he was passed out on his back again.

"Jesus, Kurt - Kurt, wake up."

He was snoring there in his towel, and I was standing, water in hand, when a weird thought came to my mind.

I put the glass down next to the vodka - and took a swig of the bottle just for the hell of it. It made me cough; tasted like I imagined rubbing alcohol would. I went for the corner of the towel, and lifted it slowly, peeking underneath - and there it was. Kurt's little fraternity member. I lifted back the other side of the terry cloth. Then I looked over at the desk with the architecture models. There was a tube of something and I looked closer and saw that it ws airplane glue. Futher over, next to a plexiglass model, there was a tube labelled Insta-Fix. The label said, *adhesion of almost all surfaces*

in seconds. Avoid contact with eyes and skin. Mmmm hmmmm. Avoid contact. Uh-huh. I took another swig of what could have been turpentine and uncapped the Insta-Fix and squeezed a line of it on to Kurt's penis. He didn't move. I squeezed out some cross lines, and he didn't move. I reached for his right hand, put some glue on his thumb, and slid it under his penis. He moved when I closed his fingers around it. But he didn't wake up.

I closed that door on my way out of his room. On the way out of the house, I pulled the fire alarm.

Sure Thing

Pete's washing his combs, you know, doing them up so they'll be all ready just in case somebody comes in all of a sudden. He keeps flicking suds sidelong at me, and then he gets right in, snapping a damp towel at my knees.

"Jump," he's saying. "Come on, boy, I wanna see you dance."

"Oh, get on out of there, Pete," I say, going for the broom. I give a jab toward his stomach with the beat up old bristles. He manoeuvres backwards, flicking the towel, working it like a sabre.

"I said you gotta dance." He snaps the towel at my elbow.

"Give it a rest, will ya. I gotta sweep up before lunch. What if Henry comes in." Henry's the boss. He owns the hair salon. "Or Megan." She's the manicurist from hell. Seems she has PMS Monday through Saturday. Sundays she sleeps.

"Aw, don't be such a mama's boy," Pete is saying.

"Don't you be calling me any names. Mama's boy, my ass. You're the one's gone an' got this job on account of Henry playing poker with your dad Tuesdays."

Pete seems a bit taken aback by this. He drops the towel on his chair, sinks his hands in his pockets.

"Aw, I didn't mean nothin' Pete. All I am is tired." I push some brown tufts of

hair into the dust pan, lean up on the broom handle. Pete sits in his chair, props his heels on the counter under the wall mirror. He starts combing his hair with one of his brushes. He has good hair, and good pipes for a guy just twenty-four. You can tell he lifts weights every day but Friday. Friday's for his girl.

"It's a graveyard today," he's saying.

"Bloody cemetery," I say back.

"Maybe we should ditch and go on over to the pool hall." He stops with the brush and gives me a wink.

"And shmooze Brenda, eh?" Brenda's a waitress at Joe's hall. She isn't no stick either. She's a swimmer, has everything right. Legs up to her neck. "Have a couple of beers."

"Head off to the drive-in later, with a case, and three girls."

"Sure Suzie would be real happy 'bout that."

Pete snarls at me. "Ah, that Suzie. She's got an attitude lately. I got a good mind to blow her off."

"Yah, right." The last time Suzie and Pete broke up he got drunk and stole one of Mr. Peterson's mares. He rode the horse right into a fence in the dark. She was all shrieking horrible and foaming at the mouth, Pete said. Had to be put down. Mr. Peterson was choked, but he forgave Pete after a while, knew he was a mess. But a good kid really. No, it would not do to have Pete and Suzie broken up again.

I notice a big shadow filtering in the window for a second, look over to meet a woman's gaze through the glass. She has a kid hanging from each elbow, a sort of wince takes over her features as one hollers.

"Looks like something's coming," I say.

Pete hops from his chair. "I don't feel like kids today, Parker. "If it's kids, you can do 'em. I'll do the lady." He says this before the door opens.

A man pokes a scowl through the door, moves in awkwardly ahead of the blonde and the two kids. He turns to the woman, talks low but firm. "I'll take Bessie and Bobby for ice-cream, till you're through."

Pete gives me a look. Gruesome names.

The man straightens his over-alls with a shrug. "You're not gonna be more than an hour, are ya?"

The woman stands looking at the kids, shoulders hunched forward, bare skin pinkish white under the straps of her crumpled sun dress. "An hour," she sighs. "Yes, I think an hour should be fine." She moves toward Pete a little, sandal heels click clicking on the tiles. She looks at him almost shyly, brushes her heavy bangs to one side with the back of her hand.

"Hey there," Pete says, throwing out a big grin. "Hot out there today, eh?"

The woman takes a look back at the kids. The boy has the girl's pigtail in his fist, and she's shrieking. The father shoves them out the door with a grunt, and a bang of the latch on wood. The woman sighs, hunches toward Pete again. I can see the sweat shiny on her neck, a dark spot forming under her breasts, making the purple of the sun dress navy. She looks all wispy and worn out standing there in front of Pete in her sandals.

"So what can we do ya for today," Pete says, stepping backward toward his chair, keeping his eyes on the woman.

"Oh, I don't know for certain." She's still shy, holding her purse with both hands now.

"Come on over here. Sit right on down." He pats the leather on the chair back. "Maybe you'd like to look at some magazines, see what's in over the last few months. Real sleek hair's the thing right now, I think. I like it anyhow."

The woman moves over into the chair, takes a magazine from Pete. "Oh, I really don't think I need anything fancy. Just somethin' for 'round the house, you know. This long hair's always a mass of tangles. Last week Bobby, he went and put marshmallows on the front porch, when the sun was out, you know? They just melted into the biggest mess of gunk. And my hair, it went and got itself in the stuff while I was trying to clean it up."

"That's a shame," Pete says, sliding up beside the chair. He sits on the armrest,

starts turning the pages of the magazine on the woman's lap. "You from around here?"

The woman hesitates over the magazines, looks from the page to her reflection in the mirror, frowning. She grabs at the tuft of bangs. "No. No, I'm visiting my uncle for the weekend."

"That right?" Pete's studying her from the armrest. He strokes his chin, tilts his head a bit. I can never really be sure if he's right interested, or faking it.

"Uh-huh." The woman's on to the glossy magazine photos again. "Tom Elliot's my uncle. Owns the big granary on the edge of Potter's road?"

"That right?" Pete's saying. "I know ol' Tom. Real fine guy that Thomas. Hear e's one hell of a poker player."

"Oh, he sure is." The woman turns her head to look right at Pete, then seems startled he's so close, lowers her eyes again. I'm wondering if Pete's got his cologne on, or just aftershave.

"You know, you've got real interesting eyes. Real nice. I'm not kiddin'. I think we should, you know, thin out those bangs some, so you can see 'em better."

I can see the woman's face reddening over her nose, under the spattering of freckles.

"Don't she have pretty eyes, Parker?"

"Why, sure. Yes, ma'am. And Pete, he don't mean no disrespect. It's just, well, we see lots of women, y'know. We notice stuff like that. It's part of deciding what to do with the hair, see?"

The woman loosens up a bit at this, smiles a little. She has straight teeth. I can tell Pete's glad. He moves from the armrest, stands behind the chair, lifts the woman's hair in the back.

"It's nice thick hair," he says. "Would make a nice blunt, to the shoulders."

"Oh, I don't know," the woman's saying. I don't know if I should."

Pete drops the hair, lifts the collar on his cotton shirt. "O.K. Well, how 'bout just a trim then?" He finds her eyes in the mirror.

"Yes, I guess." She seems disappointed.

Pete goes for a comb, parts her hair in the center. "We could shorten the front, leave the back more . . . say, do you mind telling me your name?" He was starting to work.

"Oh, uh, it's Jessica," she says, staring straight ahead. "Jessie for short."

"Oh, I like Jessica much better," Pete says. "Much more feminine, suits you better."

"You think?"

"Well yeah. Look, can I offer you a coffee or somethin'? We've got root beer too, and some diet cola, I think."

"Oh, O.K., if you don't mind. I mean if it's no trouble."

"Course not," he says. "Hey Parker, you wanna get the lady a soda?"

"Sure thing," I say back. "What kind would you like ma'am?"

"The diet, please."

"Sure thing." I have to go out back to the cooler, the sun blinding on the aluminum top. The lock jams a bit, and the diet stuff is on the bottom so it takes me a couple of minutes. When I come back in, Pete's shampooing the lady's hair in the sink. She's got her skinny legs crossed, one of the sandals dangling off her toe. Pete's using the better shampoo, the sweet bubbly one that's like coconuts.

Pete has turned on the portable stereo, and he's humming softly there, over the woman. He's massaging the suds in carefully, doesn't look away from the woman when I present the soda. "Put that at my station, eh, Parker?"

"Sure thing." I look at his hands working in the suds. The woman's eyes are closed, her lips open a little. I wish I could get that shampooing technique down. I never know how much pressure to go with.

After he's done with the rinsing, Pete escorts the woman back to the chair, delicately hands her the diet cola, the glass of ice.

The woman is smiling now, sitting up a little as Pete drapes her in the worn old cape.

Pete's moving around the chair, singing to the dance music, stroking the

woman's hair with his hand as he's combing it. "So what's it gonna be, Jessica? Want to go for it?"

She tips her head back, taking a sip of soda, scratches her neck under the towel.

"It'll be O.K., I promise. It's the starting that's a little hard. You just have to relax is all." Pete's got the length of her hair wrapped around his hand.

She looks at him in the glass, wide-eyed. Then she nods. "Yes, do it," she says. "Go ahead and do it. Whatever you think is best."

Pete's all consumed as he starts the cutting. He lifts and snips, gingerly floating around the woman, shuffling silently from front to back, a little perspiration poking through the cotton at his underarms.

At first, the woman seems a bit startled she's agreed. She watches without blinking. She scrunches her forehead as Pete snips away most of the bangs. But her face lights up some as she watches Pete, him humming and hawing, and really enjoying himself. He looks more and more satisfied as he circles around, evening out the bottom, making sure things line up right.

"How does it feel so far?" he asks, leaning over her.

"Good." She shakes her head back a little, fly away cuttings picking up the sunlight.

Pete finishes pretty fast, once he gets started, and the woman seems impressed. When he picks up the blow dryer, she's practically glowing. She closes her eyes under the warmth. I guess a person gets sleepy. Pete's got his tongue on his top lip, though, the way he does when he's trying hard to concentrate. He plants the brush carefully at the scalp, pulls the hair back smoothly in a turn of the wrist. The woman's head follows his movement, bobbing away from Pete a little each time he does a section. The woman's eyes have a light, a sort of smile even though she's not smiling.

Pete flicks the cape off her easily, and her shoulders are relaxed under the dryer. She's fingering the ice cubes in her soda glass, swinging one of her crossed legs. Her eyes open and close lazily, but when they're open they're on Pete.

I'm startled by the banging of the salon door. The open door lets in some sun

first. Then Suzie, Pete's girl.

"Oh, uh, hi there Suzie," I say. Suzie gives me a big smile.

"Hey Parker," she says, taking in Pete and the woman. Pete's running his big hands through her hair now, leaning in close to her. He's talking low so I can't hear. The woman giggles and tips her head back as Pete starts with the curling iron.

"Hello Peter," Suzie raises a brow at him. Her brows are penciled in, makeup put on like a tv model.

Pete looks over his shoulder, interrupted like. "Oh, hey, Suzie." He turns back to the woman.

"Why doncha sit by the desk, Suzie?" I suggest. "What's up, anyhow?"

Suzie struts over to the lounge chair, eyes on Pete. "Me and Pete are supposed to be having lunch."

"Oh, yeah?" Hot out there, eh?" I notice the lines of her bra through the tight t-shirt. She crosses her legs under her mini skirt. Suzie's legs are almost as good as Brenda's from the pool hall.

"Yeah, it's a scorcher," she says, looking at me. She has green eyes that narrow to slits when she's pissed off. She's pissed off. "He's late. Peter promised me lunch as soon as I got here." She parts her glossed lips, pops in a piece of gum.

"Hey, well, Pete's almost all done now." I look at him, preening with the iron. The woman's starting to look different under the mess of curls. She's giggling all the time now. Pete has his back to us.

"You're not busy," Suzie says, accusing like.

"Naw, no, I'm sure I'm not. It's pretty hot today."

"You could have done her." She tosses her head.

"Oh, no. I really couldn't ."

Pete is taking a real long time with the iron. The tousling is just a technicality. I walk over, ask him if I can finish with the primping on account of Suzie. He steps between me and the blonde, looking like I've just asked his mother to a game of strip poker.

"That ain't right," he says, one hand on the woman's shoulder. "Suzie can wait." He rubs his forehead with the back of his hand. "As for you, darlin', yeesh, you've about wore me out."

The woman smooths the top of her sun dress with her fingers. "It's all your doing. I haven't done anything." Pete was right about one thing. She did have cool eyes.

Suzie's glaring from her spot in the sun. Even I know she hates to wait. I don't want to make chit chat, so I go for the broom, start sweeping up around Pete's station - not too close to the chair.

"There," Pete says, waving his arms in abracadabra fashion. "You're gorgeous. A whole new person."

"Oh, stop," the woman says.

"Now, no shyness," Pete says. "Isn't she something, Parker?"

I don't want to look at her openly now. "Yeah, something for sure." Suzie glares still, from her spot. "Guess it's lunch, eh, Pete?" I say.

Pete starts in with the hair spray, sheltering the woman's face with his hand. Then he says, "Done deal. What a creation."

I look as she bounces from the chair, tall and smooth. I knew she would be smiling, eyeing Pete like he's the prize at a fair, something she'd had her one shot at.

"It looks real good," Pete says. "Real good."

I cough loud, wonder if Pete's wearing blinkers.

"Peter," Suzie's voice is low, warning.

Pete's not paying attention. "I just can't believe the difference." He's standing looking at Jessica with a big grin, like he's really liking seeing her.

"I'm not sure what to say," she says, her fingers sampling the curls.

"How about goodbye," Suzie says, then smacks her gum so we all hear it.

The woman doesn't care, I guess. She's standing up so straight. Pete holds one of her hands up, like he's going to waltz her around the salon.

In another second, Suzie's at my elbow, tugging at my shirt sleeve. I put the

broom down, pull back toward my chair. "Come on, Parker," Suzie says, "There's a fish special at Charlie's."

Pete leads the woman up front then, and she takes out some bills, presses them into his hand. "It's been fine," Pete says.

Suzie's got my arm, she's pulling me into the sunshine, through the open door.

"Yes, yes it has," the woman says, looking like she might swoon.

Suzie's pulling me across the gravel pathway outside. But through the glass, I can just see the woman turning on her heel, away from Pete.

As she sails toward the door with a toss of her head, a flutter of her hem, I look at Pete and wish to God I could cut hair like that.

Elevator Overture

"Hey, hold on there - hold the elevator," I'm yelling, the door still being open, the people in the car all staring straight out but not seeing anything. They've got the look of dozing cows about them, that look the cows always give me when I trail by the widow Beauchamp's vegetable garden in the afternoons, the widow's clothes flapping off her clothesline, the cows sometimes sleeping right under her polka-dotted underwear. Those cows never bugged me as much as these city sleepers do right now though, the elevator door crossing over their faces and leaving me a whole thirty seconds to get to John Casablanca's on the twenty-first floor, for the job interview. I can see the sweat poking through the collar on my cotton shirt in the mirrored wall, and I'm recognizing that the heat of a four-hour bus ride makes it pretty hard to have a good hair day (never mind that my tie's limp as wet barley). I'm working out some kinks with my comb, licking my hand and then smoothing down the side part. The whole time my camera hanging like a lead pipe from my shoulder, and this woman frowning at me from her Alfred Sung suit like I'm spitting on the flag or something. City people, they wear their underwear too tight, I think.

Anyhow, the elevator, it finally comes, and there's this stampede off it, the smell of mixed-up cologne and perfume still hanging on in the car, after. I hit the twenty-first floor, only having to stop once on seventeen, to pick up this blue-haired old lady. She smiles over her cane when I get off. She isn't in any hurry anytime, I bet. The

butterflies in my stomach, they aren't real bad until I'm out of the tile hallway, standing on this super-clean carpeting, the vacuum cleaner pathways still lingering, like they do in some people's living rooms. That kind of plush look hovers over the whole reception area. There's this guy at a typewriter, a real big guy typing away in this little desk, typing under a fern in a cranberry basket - pink actually. That isn't anything you are ever going to see back in my home town. Though I know this body builder named Pete who works in a hair salon. But I still think that's different, scissors being kind of like tools to me, and Pete being into Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis movies.

So the typing stops and this guy looks up at me. "Yes?" he says.

"Hey, how's it going?" I say.

"Fine, thank you. Can I help you?" He says this kind of irritated, the way my dad used to talk when he had to give up smoking. He used to bring me magazines and videos and whatever else, from the city - my dad, I mean. He had a heart attack a while back. I think it was from stress, the stress of being a salesman and travelling all over the province, sometimes for next to nothing, except a kick in the pants, or the "jumper," as my mom would say.

"Well sure. I'm Ivan Royer. I'm here for Yvonne Sorensen."

"Here for? Pardon me - do you and Ms. Sorensen have a date?" He looked as if he might laugh.

"No, no. I have an appointment for ten."

He checks his watch. "It's ten oh three," he says, standing up. He goes back to the oak door with the name plate, knocks, and opens it. "There's a Mister Ivan Royer to speak with you, Ms. Sorensen." He nods, then walks back to the little desk and sits down. "You'll have to wait a moment." He says this to my chest - probably looking at the camera hanging from my neck. It's only the second one I've had since my first job in Matane, the pictures I took for those weddings and local magazine write-ups being pretty basic - stills of scenery and properties, private parties, and stuff like that - but I used to jazz them up, kind of, make them wild in an acceptable kind of way, with different angles, shadows, things like that. This camera, I actually got as a present

from Riel Moran, my boss, him being pretty proud of me for having the guts to do as he said, and try the cities for jobs - use what I had, Riel said. Dig right in and show 'em what you got, he said. Sure sounded better than digging ditches the way I did when I turned fifteen.

"You do have time to have a seat?" He's smiling into an envelope he's opening.

"Sure, no problem." I'm wanting some coffee when I see the pot in the corner, by the water cooler with a tall stack of styrofoam cups. I've got my own plastic 7-11 cup - better for the environment and it holds three times as much coffee as those styrofoam jobs. "Can I grab some coffee there? I mean, is it O.K. if I have a cup?"

The receptionist nods to his typewriter.

So then I'm sitting on this leather sofa, with the coffee, and I take out my cigarettes.

"Ahem." The guy's staring at me. "There's no smoking here, sir," he says, waving to a plaque on the wall with the words engraved. "I know you can read."

"Look here, now," I say, wanting to go over and maybe pitch him out of his chair. "You'd better just cut out this higher than thou attitu-"

This loud buzz cuts me off, and he picks up the cream phone. "You can go in now, sir."

I go to the door and open it. It's all dim inside, the blinds blocking out the light, and just this one lamp on in the corner. A brunette's sitting behind a huge desk, papers piled neatly in stacks.

"Good morning, Mr. Toyer, I mean, Royer," she says, with a glance. "Please excuse the lack of lighting. I have a migraine headache."

"Hey, that's fine," I say. "Just fine." I'm noticing her eyes even from where I'm standing. They're painted up, but not gaudy. She has a turned up nose and a great voice - kind of drawls out of her easy, like cigarette smoke. I'm wondering if she's got the legs to match.

"I see you have some coffee, already, so I won't offer you a glass of water - please, sit down."

I'm in this chair, right in front of her, and she puts her elbows on the desk top, raises an eyebrow. "So, Mr. Royer, you are interested in the modelling business."

"Oh yes, yes I am."

"I see from your resume that you have some photography experience. But I've never heard of this Portraits by Lachambe."

"Oh, it's a smaller place, in York, uh, sort of near York University." I've never really been to Ontario, but I had to put down something.

"Mmmm hmmmm," she says, looking down at what must be my resume. "And what about this reference from the Ford Agency? I haven't been able to reach this Johan Isaac person you've listed."

"Oh, well, he travels around a lot, of course - that's his home number. He works freelance a lot." Johan Isaac's the name of this writer in a movie I like. He goes insane, from bad love affairs, and blows himself away in the end. I always feel bad when people kill themselves over love affairs, but it means they care anyway.

She's looking at me like I'm on a suit rack. "You know authenticity in these matters is crucial. I have a feeling I won't be able to confirm the information you've given me."

"Well, I'm really quite good with private parties - I mean, taking still shots and that, but I can do just about anything -" I'm really wondering why she's called me in at all.

"Yes, I'm sure you are. But I need testimony to your work. I see you haven't brought a portfolio, and this reference from Mary Jane Wilcox in Metis Beach isn't useful. You were a waiter, part-time, I believe, at her restaurant - Mary's Great Eats?"

I'm feeling like I'm back in the principal's office, back in high school. But my principal was bald and just a total goof-brain. "Well, people have to start somewhere." Can't exactly impress executives with action shots of Johnnie pulling out his sister's hair at the Sampson's wedding reception. No model's going to work that hard for her money.

"And?" Mary's Great Eat's seemed to have put a bad taste in her mouth.

I drink a little sip of coffee. I'm no con artist really, and I can tell she's on to me anyhow. "See, the truth is I just need a chance, Miss Yvonne." (I sound like some kid in an old black and white movie already). "I'm good with a camera, really I am. But I'm new here, you know? Haven't been to Quebec since I was little. I'm new to the business too. But, hey, I'm bilange - I mean bilingual - my mom was English so I can speak both languages perfectly. I'm just twenty, and, well, I just thought if I could get my foot in the door-"

"Mr. Royer, you know passing fraudulent information is a crime." Her nose is in the air, and she's leaning back toward the window, her eyes smiling, I think.

"But I'm not - I mean, I'm really not that way, you know."

"No, I don't know," she says, quiet. "And I'm not interested in your explanations." Just interested in giving me a scolding.

"I just want a chance, Miss Sorensen. Just a chance to-"

"So you've said." Her eyes moved from my face to the Pentax straddling my tie.

"I'm really quite a good photographer-"

"Good photographers don't need to display their cameras like cheap jewelry, Mr. Royer. You might try to simplify your look a little."

"I really don't see how having a cam-"

"And the pictures you have included with your application are a bit cliche. We look for originality in our people, a flair for the unexpected."

"But I've got work like that - I just didn't think I could-"

"I'm sorry, but my migraine is getting bad again. Would you mind turning out the lamp on your way out?"

So she knew all along. She knew all along what she'd say before I even walked in the door, and just wanted to watch me like I was a goldfish in a bowl. Only she didn't seem to find me colorful enough. My cousin's goldfish couldn't keep his attention so he flushed them down the toilet when they were still alive. I always thought that was mean, but he said it was O.K. 'cause they never felt anything.

Anyhow, I've wasted fifty dollars on a bus ride. "I'm no stupid fish," I mumble.

"What?"

"Oh, never mind." I take my cup and go to the lamp and turn it out. When I pass the little reception desk, the guy doesn't look up. I want to mess up the nice vacuum lines on the carpet. A painting of a lady standing in front of the moon in a field looks stupid there, on the wall. Like people are always hanging out in dark fields alone, their clothes half draped off. I haven't seen any women like that. Women have to be careful at night. I worry about my little sister all the time, worry about some looney aiming at her with something a little less conspicuous than a camera.

I go to the men's room on the way out, to get some water for my cup, my throat super sore from the air conditioning. There's music playing in there, and soft lights. I imagine what the women's john must be like, and Miss Yvonne in it. I try to imagine her taking a piss, but I can't. I've never seen any lady drop the snazzy kind of underwear she must have on. It's probably all silk and lace and stuff. Maybe it's gold plated. The girls I know wear cotton Jockeys, and play pool and drink draught beer. And they don't mind an old line if you're going to be really good. I do take good pictures. I do. Not of models and shit, but pictures of people doing real things - playing ball, and threshing wheat, and smoking in the rain under a porch all dripping. Smoking in the rain is sexy, the cold of the damp ground giving in to a little flash of something warm that you can taste. I'm not good at explaining what I mean, but I can see it through a lens. I've just never been anywhere, that's all.

Back in the hall, I'm waiting for the elevator. It makes a little ding when it hits the floor and I get on. I'm bending down, tying my shoe, when it stops on a lower floor, and these black high heels and stockinged legs get on. And just guess what, these are great looking legs, but when I follow them up, turns out they're little Miss Yvonne's. What she's doing a couple of floors down, I don't know.

"You patrolling the building," I say.

"The women's restroom is out of order on twenty-one."

"Oh yeah? That right?"

"Yes, that's right.

And I just know no one would ever believe it, but then the elevator car gives this jolt and makes a groaning noise. And creaks. And there's the fire alarm screaming. I look over at Yvonne in her eight hundred dollar suit - just like the ones in the air -brushed pages of Cosmopolitan - and I can tell she's swearing though I can't really hear it. I didn't think she'd swear ever.

"Great, I've got an eleven o'clock to prepare for," she yells.

"What?"

"An appointment, pre-par-ation," she shouts, like I wouldn't know the word if I fell over the thing.

"This happen often?"

"The elevator? Oh, in the last week, yes. It's no emergency, just something wrong in the system. Like they don't pay those maintenance idiots enough. I should have known to take the damn stairs."

Yelling over the fire alarm reminds me of conversations I'd have with my buddies on the lake with a six pack, the motor boat droning on. Yvonne is clutching her ears, that migraine thing, I guess, and I almost feel a little bad for her. I drink my water, leaning up on the elevator rail.

"How long does it take to clear up?" I yell.

"An hour, sometimes, depending on what dolt they send over."

I finish my water, study the cup. I sit down on the floor with it. "You got a pen?" I ask.

"What?"

"A pen."

She reaches inside her jacket and takes out a gold ballpoint. I notice her long fingernails, with pink rose kind of polish, a little diamond glued on the pinky.

I take the pen and start drawing on the cup. The plastic is hard so I kind of half engrave, half write. Little curvy designs are all I feel like at first, but then I draw a bird, a sea gull. I'm a little distracted by the legs. And so the fire alarm shuts down after about ten minutes and then there's just this silence with me drawing for about half an hour,

maybe forty minutes, till there's no space left on the cup at all, and Yvonne is sitting down with her shoes off, her face kind of in this determined wincing expression. She keeps opening the snap on her handbag, between shredding little holes in a kleenex with her finger nails.

Then she says, "Mr. Royer - Ivan?"

"Yeah," I say.

"What was that about the goldfish?

"Goldfish? Oh - uh, nothing important." I don't want to tell her about my cousin and his toilet bowl thing.

"No, really." She looks really pained.

"Nothing. You know, I could have shown you some pictures of my parent's farm, and my old girlfriend at Banff."

"Oh, yeah? So why didn't you? Why don't you? I mean, you still can."

"Oh, naw, I don't think so." She can't actually be interested.

She's quiet, there, on the floor, and I think of the picture in my wallet. It's a picture of my girlfriend slalom skiing at dusk, the lake all flat, and a rooster tail shooting out gold from the last bit of sun flecking in the water, the tail curling up high and falling as the ski cuts deep. I take it out then, and Yvonne looks interested, almost like she's really wanting to see something. I figure she's just bored, but I pass it to her anyway.

"It's nice," she says, dropping her handful of kleenex for a sec.

"Yeah," I say.

She gives it back and curls her legs up. "Look, Mr. Royer - Ivan." She looks sick now, but she wants to say something.

"Is it the migraine thing?"

She doesn't say anything.

I put the picture back in my wallet. She looks like she might cry then, and I wonder if I should hand it back.

"Ivan - I've been drinking cranberry juice all morning for my headache."

"That right." Nothing profound in that.

"Yes - well um the truth is - I feel like I'm going to explode - my bladder, I mean."

"You're kidding, right?"

Her eyes are steady on me. "No, I'm not."

"Well, what are you gonna do? We should be out of here soon enough."

She shakes her head.

"Well, I don't see what you can do. Is it really that bad?"

She looks at the cup, still in my hand.

I really try to look away, but I catch a glimpse of the curve of her white buttocks as she's squatting there, lavender silk underwear around her ankles. And maybe I should be ashamed, but before I know what I'm doing I've got my camera aimed and focused, my finger ready to release the shutter. And there's Miss Yvonne, caught in mid stream, a look of absolute astonishment on her pale face. But then she's straightening up, shaking a little, and I can't believe it, but her open mouth is closing on a bit of a smirk. And within a second she's shivering with laughter. The light from the flash doesn't even startle her.

Bodily Functions

I remember this one time - I would have been about six - when my little brother pulled all the backings off my mom's Kotex pads and stuck them to the living room carpet. He thought they made nifty markers on his Dupont highway. My mom was a real estate agent then, and I can still remember the crimson horror that burned through her make-up when she discovered Johnnie's maxi-pad community. A client was on her heels, and she removed him and his tea cup from the scene, and then plucked the pads from the carpeting without a word. My mother's the kind of person who freezes chicken carcasses in plastic bags so as not to offend the garbage man with the smell. She is not someone who would be into her kid making tampon mobiles.

Now you could fashion a hat with tampons dangling from the brim and march it down a New York runway and nobody would bat an eye. The hour of the emergency supply - that's what my mom called feminine protection products, *emergency supplies* , like, if you ever fell into a ravine on a camping trip and broke your leg, maybe you could make a splint out of the things - has passed. Now you have to turn off the television during dinner if you don't want to be faced with regularity and Attends undergarments. Trojan insists that sex without a condom is the same as bungee jumping without a cord - there's a risk for you. Now it's almost trendy to buy condoms - West Ed mall has a store called the Rubber Tree, and we're not talking house plants. Thank God our eyes have been opened to the controllability of bodily functions. Our bodies - our castles

- are now being ruled by common sense. Ignorance has been flung into the same moat as censorship. *Now* people communicate about touchy subjects. Now their minds are huge.

And I'm your fairy godmother. Really. Yes, and you have one wish - what's that? You'd like your penis enlarged? Oh - you'd like to be unbandaging yourself after your breast augmentation surgery. Well, I really don't think that's wise. You want the same jeans -oh, genes - as Cindy Crawford? Want to look like Tom Cruise? But I could give you the same I.Q. as Einstein. You could be the Prime Minister or even the president - God knows you don't need to be a genius to do that. What's that you say? Kim Campbell doesn't have the legs to be in a rock video? O.K., what if I eliminate the AIDS virus? Yes, that would mean no more rubbers - you can shoot and score. You'll take it then? Wow, your brain may not be made of cabbage. Well, O.K.. I *will* give you that. Einstein does have bad hair.

So anyway, have I mentioned that my boyfriend is an idiot? Well, I mean, he' s not an idiot, *really* . He's going to the U of A, and he's in sciences, but he's just kind of ignorant sometimes. Like last week, we went into this bar on Whyte Avenue. It's called RE-Bar, and I knew it was kind of a gay hangout before we went, but I thought it would be O.K. to check the place out. So, there we were, me and Brandon in the RE-Bar, when these two guys - both in black leather pants - in front of us start making out - just for a second. And Brandon is literally suffocating. And then he's pulling my arm off, saying, 'there're too many fags in here,' and he's pulling me toward the door, and that's when we start arguing, because I'm not some homophobic moron like he is. But he wins the argument because we had his car and I'm not into walking home alone in the middle of the night. Plus, we live together, so where was I going to go. And get this, like, he had the nerve to stop for condoms on the way home - as if he'd be needing them. Later on, at about 4:00 a.m., he woke me up. Not on purpose. He was laughing in his sleep - just having the happiest teddy bear slumber I'd ever seen him in. I felt like putting my pillow over his face.

I guess in all fairness I should point out that homophobia is his only real fear.

That and a fear of heights. But he's really not that bad of a guy. Usually he's pretty harmless, and sometimes he's pretty hilarious even. Some nights he mumbles chemistry formulas in his sleep, or warns me about potential dangers. One time he was talking in his sleep and he said,"Julia, watch out - they're sharp," and he was pointing at the ceiling. And he kept saying "O.K., Julia?" like that, so I leaned over and said, "What are they?" and he said, "They're knives." He likes to cook dinner for me, and he chops a lot of fresh vegetables for our stirfries, so I didn't think it was *that* strange. I just said, "O.K., thanks Brandon," and he shut up after that.

Brandon's a little bit jealous of some of my male friends at the university, especially Todd. I mean, he doesn't let on that he's jealous. He'll just say things like, "Don't you think Todd should spend more time with Darlene?" or "Darlene doesn't like bars - maybe you should talk to Todd about that." It's true Darlene doesn't like R.A.T.T. - Darlene's Todd's girlfriend of two years - but it's not like we go there every day. Just on Fridays. But it's always a big group of us, Todd, Chris, and Jeff - and Lisa. And Brandon's always invited. Sometimes I'm glad he's not there though, because Darlene always gets really jealous when Todd and I are together, and I think Brandon picks up on it. I mean, we're just excellent friends, Todd and I. I mean there's some physical attraction there. Todd's got these great blue eyes and dark brown hair, and he looks killer in a pair of Levi's. But it's no big deal. O.k., so I know there's chemistry. Lisa was always telling me it was pretty obvious, but now I wonder. I mean, I'm sure nothing's ever going to happen. I don't think so.

Like, being at R.A.T.T. is hardly romantic. It's like a beer guzzling parlour. The wild west. This one time a few weeks back, for instance, Todd and I decided we'd have this drinking contest. Pretty mature, I know, but we're all twenty-one or so, and sometimes we have these lapses. I remember Lisa tried to stop me - she kept tugging at strands of her red hair, and then at my sleeve, and saying "bad idea, Julia. Bad idea," but I said it was no big deal. (Now that I think about it, maybe she doesn't like Todd). See, the challenge was to try and drink a whole pitcher of draught beer through two straws in less than twelve minutes - you put a straw in anything and I'll suck it up like

a slurpee. So anyway, Todd went first, the whole table watching, and he got it down to about an eighth of a pitcher in ten minutes. Then he sat there, looking like a Tums ad, and you could tell he'd just explode if he went for the finish. He didn't. I won the contest. If you could call it winning. I mean, there was nothing in the rules about keeping the stuff down. After eleven minutes, I ran to the bathroom like I was on speed, but I still managed to puke on my dress. Todd had a locker in phys. ed. and we went over so I could borrow some sweat pants and a t-shirt. After I changed, I puked in this trash can, and then we sat on the grass by S.U.B for an hour, talking. See, we're just friends.

I used to think Brandon and I could talk about anything, but lately I've been thinking that he's majorly anal retentive. Like, the other day I was reading this article about breast augmentation and stuff. See, I guess some women would like to have a chest like Madonna (I saw a Jane Mansfield movie recently though, and man, Madonna's got nothing on that dead film queen. Her measurements are abnormal). Seems some women feeling unsexy being flat or something. I never had any problem, but I guess Glamour decided they'd check out men's feelings on the male body perfect. They did this survey - supposedly it was random - where they asked men about penis enlargement. I mean, there's really no such thing, but they wanted to know if men would be into it. You know, if it was painless, *free* , and took something like five minutes. And, anyway, something like ninety percent of the guys surveyed said they wouldn't do it. I mean, it's not on display the way women's breasts are, but I was still surprised. So I asked Brandon if he would do it. And he just gave me a look like I was Satan or something. I didn't ask him *to* do it but he got all defensive, saying, "What are you asking that for?" I mean, it's not like he has anything to worry about.

I guess I should mention that today he's not freaking. He did that at around 2:00 this morning. Just had a total spazz. Right now he's quiet because he's not speaking to me. See, he had this majorly tough lab to do today or something, in zoology. I'm in Arts, so I never get freaked over labs, but I guess they must be pretty hard. So, he had this lab, and I guess he went to bed at like, ten, or whatever last

night, so he'd be all fresh at 8:00 a.m.. But I didn't wake him up at 2:00 in the morning knowing this - I honestly don't think he even told me about it. And see, it's Lisa's birthday today, so we thought we'd get a jump start on things by starting the party last night. Seemed like a cool idea, and everything was cruising along fine after she'd had those B-52's - I wasn't drinking, the pitcher incident still being pretty fresh in my mind. But adding Long Islands to shooters is not a good idea- I mean, if you're at all interested in standing up. So anyway, Lisa was feeling no pain at all by eleven, and then we just hung out at Dewey's until one or so - nothing strange went on there - and then headed home. We walked to my place, where Lisa had left her car, and we decided she'd better stay over unless she wanted to have an interlude with a lamp pole or a cop, or a cop carrying a lamp pole (she said that last thing).

I guess we *were* pretty darn loud when we came in, just laughing and talking and stuff. I guess it's true that I *could* have driven Lisa home in the first place. But I just didn't think it was a big deal. I didn't know that Lisa was going to slip on the kitchen floor while she was using the telephone. I didn't know she was going to accost the answering machine on her way down. I mean, yeah, it was quite the noise, and she could have broken it - if it had worked in the first place. Brandon even told her himself that it didn't work. In our bedroom, he was parading around like he had piranhas in his boxer shorts, saying he didn't know what the hell I was thinking - and was I drunk? And just a minute there but was that Todd's cologne he smelled on my shirt collar? I told him he was really a brick short of the wall we normal humans call reality, and, well, that got a really good response. He started screaming obscenities then, and marched out of the bedroom - right in front of Lisa with his Gumby Bear undies, very threatening - and told us both to get out. Todd was probably waiting in the elevator anyway,he said ... and just who did Lisa think she was telephoning at that hour? I could have argued with him but I didn't want to get evicted because of the yelling, so I got Lisa and we went back outside.

I figured I'd drive Lisa home and then give her car back this afternoon. Not a problem. So we got in the car, and everything was cool. I started it up, and we headed

out toward Riverbend where Lisa lives. There was this classical music tape already in the deck, so I just left it, and this saxophone solo distracted me for a minute. But then somewhere along the Whitemud Freeway I started to complain. I mean, Brandon and I have no sexual screw-ups, and I did feel pretty shitty for getting him all riled up like that. So anyway, I started to cry a little. I mean it wasn't any major deal, like maybe one tear or something, and Lisa has seen me upset lots of times before. I've known her since the fifth grade - she was there the time I got pelted in the nose during soccer and my nose started to bleed all over. I remember she took me to the bathroom after saying I had a red moustache.

We weren't really very good friends until university, but I figured I knew her pretty well. Anyways, while we were driving off the freeway, Lisa kept on saying, "It's O.K., Julia - really it's O.K," and she had this really ditsy look of drunk concern on her face, and just looking at her made me almost want to start laughing for a second. So by the time we got to her place I was feeling all right. She lives with her parents so I parked by the hedge, shut the headlights off so they wouldn't wake up, and killed the motor. Then I, like, leaned over her to open the car door - I mean she *was* trashed, and asked her if she was O.K. to walk in on her own. And right then, as I drew my hand away, she hugged me around the neck, and kissed my cheeks. "Don't worry about Brandon," she mumbled. I just smiled a little, I think. I mean, no big deal. It was when I felt her lips on my neck that I froze. There was no mistaking it - I know I felt her tongue right under my ear. Ten seconds later and I was halfway down the block.

I saw Lisa today, in history class. I just sat beside her like always, and said happy birthday, but I was late so we didn't talk much. On the way out, I was going to say something but she had this sort of solid look to her features, a sort of stiffness that matched the tight braid in her hair. I'd like to ask her what that was all about last night. If it was just too much alcohol - really, I'd give her a way out. I mean, how would *you* feel if you were her?

But I know things will just continue on as always. I know we'll never talk about it.

Smooth As Wallpaper

Early this morning, Ellen Barrie released her pincurls, arranged them strategically under the border of the low-brimmed hat she wears for garden parties. She likes to keep the fine lines on her forehead camouflaged, compensates by penciling her brows outside their natural boundaries. She has an artificial, constant expression of alarm because of the brows, but those who know her never catch her by surprise - not really. She has mastered the art of the outdoor party, sees her guests as being arrangeable, like pickles around finger sandwiches. Her attention is delivered evenly to each bundle straddling its piece of patio furniture, her smile eventually saturating every inch of the backyard, the way the Barrie' s sprinkler does when turned on at evening time. *Don't water during the day, for God's sakes,* Mrs. Barrie always says. *You'll burn the geraniums.* Kevin Barrie counts on his wife's consistency, dotes on her sense of importance at pretentious gatherings. His lack of actual participation leaves him free to consider other things.

At the moment, Ellen is talking to Jim Croach's wife, an over- weight woman in a halter top and deck sandals. Cecelia Croach moves her hand skilfully over the hors

d'oeuvre table like a blackjack player.

"Isn't this lovely," she says, as she discovers the salmon.

"Oh, I absolutely *must* have another one of these," she says, over the shrimp.

Ellen Barrie is expecting these exclamations, is pleased by Mrs. Croach's fawning over the creations. The shower of compliments makes Ellen conspicuous, as if she's produced something fresh as a new-born baby.

"Tits and asses," Ellen is saying. "Tits and asses flying by my window all day long. No wonder I'm getting an ulcer."

Barrie is choosing ice cubes for his scotch glass, does not have to look up to know his wife's squinting over the fence at the sun-reddened back of Neuman Smith, glaring at the belly girating over the orange strip of Speedo bathing suit. Barrie can hear the backs of legs slapping *shamelessly* off the trampoline. *Shameless* is his wife's word. Barrie's not looking because Jane Smith isn't out there. She has left her sunning and is just disappearing through the screen door with an empty pitcher, the curls of her hair free to scale the trim back, a calf muscle turning from white to brown as it passes into the shade.

Barrie isn't sleeping with her. Not yet. Thirty years of marriage has left him accustomed to thinking with his brain, and he's not altogether willing to suffer his wife's scrutiny knowing he's actually done something. He's not that great of an actor outside the court room, and his one groping encounter with Jane Smith, behind the pool shed, before dinner, left him with an uneasy grasp on the gravy tray. Barrie's not satisfied that Jane is worth it, though she is ten years younger than Ellen, and a fair bit shapelier, working out to aerobic tapes Mondays and Thursdays. But she lacks his wife's charm, her easy ability to ignore his slowly inflating spare tire, to caress his ego without making a mockery of it. Jane Smith had been to court once, to watch, finding Barrie's defence manoueverings sexy, his intelligence somehow exotic - her husband is a firefighter. But she'd teased him about his awkward disposition towards french kissing that time in the shed - Ellen had never been much into that. Barrie isn't sure he's up to the sexual challenge, couldn't tolerate being found inadequate. He is more intrigued

by the idea of pulling something over on Neuman Smith, giving that orange *Speedo* bathing suit a little snap. The mere *possibility* of lighting a fire under Jane while her husband is putting one out elsewhere keeps Barrie undecided.

Barrie is examining Neuman Smith over his scotch glass, Smith still rocketting with monotony from the springing trampoline. Smith has a bandana tied under his longish hair - his *diaper* , Ellen calls it - really doesn't have that great of a physique. He is bulky and bleached from over here in the garden. A man of little class, Barrie is thinking.

"Well, I guess it's true what they say," Ellen is saying, "Firefighters are courageous - we certainly know this one has balls."

Barrie looks at his wife, still escorted by Cecelia Croach. She is too elegant in her off-the-shoulder dress, too refined under the hat, for such raw language. He is used to her planting obscenities as she makes her way through the garden, nipping the drooping heads off the geraniums, sweeping up grass clippings. But tits and asses didn't belong with basic black and wine spritzers, balls belonged in Neuman Smith's basketball hoop.

"Ellen, dear," Barrie finds himself at his wife's elbow, his hand on the small of her back. He bends close to her ear, giving Cecelia Croach a cool smile. "Stay away from the punch."

Ellen pulls away, smiles with closed lips. "I have a headache, dear," she says. "You've been neglecting the group. Something bothering you?"

"Stay away from the sauce," Barrie says back, still turning the corners of his lips upward.

"You know I don't drink, dear."

Barrie feels a hand on his shoulder, turns to face the regular tie and jacket, the crooked smile of Chris Pearce.

"This is a great spot you've got here," Chris says. "Very nice piece of property."

The words *nice piece* make the cubes in Barrie's glass chatter. He finds himself surveying the crowd evenly as a pretense to checking over the fence for Jane Smith.

She's returned in a change of bathing suit - a pink on teal florai number.

"Afternoon," Barrie says. "You enjoying yourself? Need a drink? I've got some excellent scotch going here."

"I'm great, Barrie - perfect. Wondering when we're going to get to that golf game though. Supposed to be clear skies on Sunday."

"That right," Barrie is saying. He is looking at Pearce's pressed collar, the familiar fabric of the trousers, comparing Pearce to the other partners scattered over the back yard like social debris. Pearce looks pressed, approachable, like a holiday greeting card. Barrie decides this is good for public relations and gains a little more respect for him. "We'll see about the game," he says.

Pearce puts his hands carefully in his trouser pockets, leans back, the sunlight playing up the shine from his sparsely haired head. "Ellen's got an edge to her today, eh?"

Barrie isn't used to his wife's public disposition being a topic of conversation. She's usually as smooth and unimposing as wallpaper. "What's that?"

"She has a thing for your neighbour - the trampoline, I mean."

Barrie is looking past Pearce's curious smile, noticing Neuman Smith's descent from the trampoline to the side of Jane Smith, under the basketball hoop. Jane has her arms crossed, is hugging her breasts with the carefree air of a twenty year old in a Budweiser ad. "That so?" Barrie finds himself saying.

Chris Pearce is dissatisfied, shifts his weight from one trouser leg to another.

"Don't worry - we'll get to the golf game," Barrie reassures him.

Pearce resumes his crooked smile, Barrie takes his leave gracefully, like a doctor who's given an acceptable prognosis.

Barrie looks over the lawn to the veranda, spots the crossed ankles of his wife, follows the line of the thin legs into the dress, knows she tucked the skirt neatly under her thighs before positioning herself in the chair. He notes the pickle hesitating in the manicured fingers, its movement to and from her lips as she considers taking a bite and then puts it off in favour of continuing her talk. She's probably on about the

geraniums again, he thinks. She loves to prattle on about the resiliency of the leaves in pre-frost conditions.

Barrie is aware of the soft crunching of the grass under the soles of his shoes as he makes his way to the patio, deflects the darting, paper-airplane smiles of John Curlie and Jennie Jones by pretending to have his mind on something particular, stroking his chin to communicate deliberate contemplation.

He is making his way past Ellen and three sparesly-clad backs, thinking he might hover over the appetizer table for a while, its elevated position giving him a better scope of the Smith patio.

"Snipped it off like a sausage," Ellen is saying with conviction.

"Threw it right out the window," Shirley Denham says.

"Mrs. Bobbit," Ellen says. "She *bobbed* it all right."

Barrie's shoes cease their steady clip over the thick lawn, his neck craning toward the veranda. He feels a quick revulsion for the trim ankle of his wife, eyes the skinny calf swinging gingerly between the barricade of legs, is repelled by the fortress of thighs set up by the other women participating in the chatter. He redirects his course, heads for the refreshment table, nearer to Ellen.

"Quite amazing the way the doctor just reattached it - supposed to be fully functional again," Ellen says.

So she *is* talking about that atrocity again, Barrie thinks. He is leaning against the cloth of the beverage table, almost upsets a wine glass with his jacket sleeve. She hasn't mentioned the Bobbits since she initially discovered them in the *Globe and Mail* that Sunday at dessert. *Oh*, she said, hovering greedily over her morsel, *Oh my*, she repeated, giggling, like a school girl peeking into the showers of the boy's locker room. Mrs. Bobbit claimed to be the victim of her husband's sexual improprieties, decided to take action one night as he slept beside her in their three bedroom home. Barrie could imagine Mrs. Bobbit's shadow slithering over her husband's features, her pallid, vampire-like anticipation as she looked greedily from the blade of the scissors in her hand, to Mr. Bobbit's penis. But that was as far as his imagination would take him. He couldn't

reconstruct the scene further, could not imagine the woman hacking the thing off like some intoxicated Gainer's employee, running out to the car with it. After she'd confessed, they discovered it in a ditch. Just imagine, Barrie recalls thinking, someone would have actually had to recognize the item. Somone would have had to pick it up, out of the gravel.

"I once found a polaroid of one under the wiper of the station wagon," Cecelia Croach is saying.

"Really?" Ellen says.

"Oh, yes. At first I was just horrified, but then I found myself examining it, being critical - you know. It really was a very poor specimen."

Barrie looks at his wife, at the hat bobbing suddenly over a clap of laughter. He is looking for evidence of over-indulgence but can't pinpoint the location of Ellen's wine glass. It has to be there somewhere, he is thinking. In any case, Ellen is capturing a larger audience. Even the women who are not openly listening seem to be hungrier, thirstier, drawn to the tables where Ellen is most easily studied, and heard. The crowd is polarizing, the men moving away from their wives and the finger sandwiches, forming their own group closer to the fence, by the rose bushes. Graham Denham has lit a cigar, Jim Croach is drinking beer right out of the bottle, Chris Pearce has stuffed his hands into his pockets, upsetting the line of his trousers.

There is the twangy thumping of the Smith's basketball, loud as shrapnel from Barrie's position near the veranda. Jane Smith stops her dribbling long enough to send the ball up, the *w* of her buttocks protruding out from under the swimsuit as she skips forward, laughing as the shot ricochets off the back board, bounces into the Barrie' s petunias.

Chris Pearce looks from the ball to Jane's upturned hands, the helpless smile, sends the ball back with a one-handed shove, is thanked by a vigorous, fingery wave.

"Tits and asses," Ellen is saying, "Tits and asses flying by my veranda all day long."

Barrie feels a tingling at the back of his neck, a tightening across his shoulders.

"We're going to screen the fence eventually, you know. Kevin has promised to get me some green ash trees for that spot beside the rose bushes, haven't you dear?"

Barrie can feel his wife's eyes takir.g him in, knows she'll shrug him off and look away if he pretends to be busy with a drink, pretends not to be listening.

"Anyway, in the spring, I imagine," Ellen says.

His wife's peculiarity is getting to Barrie, her casual bantering leaving him wobbly, making him feel conspicuous about his glances, his groping over the fence for Jane Smith. He is thinking that Ellen has to be on about something, is absolutely sure she doesn't *know*. He considers the possibility that he has been neglecting her, wonders if he should flirt with her a little, initiate sex with her after the party. But Ellen has never been obsessive about sex, Barrie is thinking. Maybe he's missed something else, broken a promise or a piece of Wedgewood china, and forgotten.

Barrie notices the hesitation in Chris Pearce's lop-sided smile as it intercepts him from its spot over by the fence, is suddenly aware that he's been caught staring, though not looking, at Jane Smith - Jane is hunching forward from the waist, brushing her long hair with her fingers. Barrie is instantly conscious of how guilty he must look, how vulnerable he is out in the open - separated - abandons his drink and moves instinctively to join the other men. He steps in beside Jim Croach, feels a sense of relief, like he's just avoided being swiped by a Jaguar. He loses the ability, and thus, the temptation to study Jane because of the height of the fence.

"Interesting party," Croach says, taking a sip of beer from the bottle.

Denham is still holding his cigar, touches the back of his hand to his nose in between drags, a habit he's had since law school. He uses his nose the same way some people use mirrors or the polished glass of office buildings, to reassure himself that he is actually here, a solid mass to be reckoned with.

"When are you going to start with the steaks, Barrie?" Denham says. Every garden partier anticipated the moment when the host would step up to the barbecue and supervise the succulent spattering of the beef on the grill. In this climate, shish kabobs certainly had no appeal.

"I'd have more respect for her if she'd shot him," Pearce says. The comment is welcomed as heartily as a surprise witness for the prosecution. This meant they were going to have to talk about it.

"Really, man," Barrie says. It's the same thing he says when a colleague misses something really obvious, ends up screwing up a simple paper trail so that expenses run all cock-eyed.

Graham Denham touches the back of his hand to his nose again, is squinting curiously at the group under the veranda. Jim Croach is reluctant to push down the remnants of his beer, knows he'll have to move within ear-shot to get another one. John Curlie is bending forward, eyes scrutinizing the foliage of the flowering plants in their bed. Barrie is remembering the time he was interrupted watching a rather tasteless flick, a home-made pornographic film that was submitted as evidence in a divorce trial.

"Kevin - Kevin," Ellen is waving her hand, her wedding band large enough to catch a glint of sunlight. "Are you going to get started on the meat, dear? It's getting on, people must be famished."

Oh, yes, Barrie is thinking. He can picture the men at the party, lined up neat as clothespins, waiting for the steaks as if at a buffet table, plates held coincidentally over their groins.

"Kevin?" Ellen is standing now, peering over her group.

Barrie abandons his place at the rose bush, treads over the crisp lawn, considers how he might break up the present ranks. He could go into the kitchen for the steaks, pretend there was a phone call for Ellen - she'd tell him to take a message. He could say it was urgent, something about one of the kids. He couldn't imagine what he'd do with her once he got her indoors on that pretense. She'd be on him as soon as she knew he'd made it up, would startle him with something sarcastic, in her state of irritation, tongue lashing at him like a wet towel. Maybe he could pretend they were disconnected, put his hand up the elegant black dress - no, she'd be uninterested, worrying what the call could have been about.

Barrie is making tracks toward his wife, the group of women quieting with his approach. Ellen is pointing to the steaks stacked neatly beside the barbecue. "Everything is all set, dear. If you can just turn on the flame. I've brought out the tongs."

Barrie smiles delicately at the women, confronts their looks head on, like a bull fighter entering a ring. He realizes that targeting Ellen would be of little consequence. Even if he were to corner her and get her concentrating on him, the others would still be parading the original topic. He could see that they were firmly stationed, sandbagged in behind their leader.

"You look a bit flushed," Ellen says. "Why don't you fix yourself a soda, Kevin."

Flushed, Barrie thinks. He knows he is *not* flushed. Warm perhaps. "I'm fine, Ellen," he says.

Barrie is next to the barbecue, has time to fiddle with the gas knob momentarily before the conversation resumes its former rushing hiss of animation, sweeping over him like sewer water.

"Oh, yes," Ellen is saying. "I was a nurse before the kids were born - you know."

"And one of the doctors did *that* ? By *mistake* ?" Jennie Jone' s voice is hinging on a giggle, a wave about to fold.

"Oh, certainly," Ellen says. "I was right there in the operating room. Doctors were horridly inept in the late fifties."

"And it was supposed to be a *hernia* operation?" Cecelia Croach is edging forward, eyeing Ellen like she's a page in the *Enquirer*.

What are they on about now, Barrie is thinking. Nurse trivia - bedposts and bedpans, bedknobs and broomsticks - the good old days. Ellen had taken care of some celebrities at the Mayo clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Rock Hudson had been there, for a disk operation. Thank goodness, Barrie thinks. Now the conversation can take on a different course, good cheer won't be shattered off the hull of the boat Bobbit.

Barrie is having some trouble recalling the proper procedure for lighting the barbecue. Does the knob on the left need to be opened before the one on the right, or

does the right-handed procedure supersede that of the left? Perhaps they were meant to operate in sychronicity. Maybe the valve was shut off.

"Did the guy sue?" someone wants to know. The possibility of legal action makes Barrie instantly attentive, lucid as an airline pilot.

"Oh, no," Ellen says. "The doctor was fired of course, prevented from practicing further. But *he* was allowed to deliver the explanation to the patient. Nobody knows *what* he told him, but we guessed he claimed to have found a tumor or something - it was better for the hospital that way - prevented leakage, a scandal."

"Ellen," Barrie says. "Can you give me a hand with this thing? The valve's shut off or something."

"Certainly, dear." Ellen clips across the veranda in her neat sling shoes, peers into the cave of the barbecue. Barrie is reminded of Jane Smith by the steady spring of the trampoline, glances over the hood of the barbecue, expecting to see the familiar bulk of Neuman Smith falling out of his orange *Speedos*. But it is a pair of fleshy breasts bounding within pink teal that meets his inquiry, the full thighs plunging into the bed of the trampoline, sunlit hair splaying out around Jane Smith like a welcome mat.

"Deciding where to put the trees, dear?" Ellen is saying.

"Wh - what?" Barrie snaps back to his wife.

"I think they need to go in right by the roses."

"Yeah. Yes, I'd say so."

"The barbecue's all ready," Ellen says.

Barrie feels as if he's almost fallen out of the open doorway of an airborn 747, decides to show some gratitude for the conversational parachute. "You never mentioned a potential law suit at the Mayo clinic," he says.

"Oh, it wasn't in Rochester," Ellen says, smiling.

"No?" Barrie is still spinning.

"No, dear, it was in Winnipeg. A surgery mishap. I'm sure I told you. The time when the doctor was performing the hernia procedure, had all the intestine and whatever-"

"Ellen - it's close to dinner," Barrie puts a hand to his stomach, looks to the steaks.

"Well, I'm sure I told you - you know, we had to send the thing down to the lab, and the analyst just had a fit - remember?"

"Must of forgotten," Barrie says. He is noticing that the flame isn't on in the barbecue.

Ellen is back in the circle of sunhats and spritzers.

"So what did the lab analyst do?" Jennie Jones says.

"He was in absolute hysterics," Ellen says. *"What the hell is this* , he was saying over the telephone. *Jesus Christ*, he kept saying. And I said, well, it's a penis. And he said, *I know what it is, but Christ, what the hell is it doing here?* The poor man was definitely ready for a sedative."

Barrie straightens up, turns his head slowly to examine his wife. A doctor who cut off a patient's penis by accident. And Ellen was in the operating room. *She was assisting. Could she possibly have known, have instinctively anticipated the bloody atrocity? Were the other nurses in on it?* Barrie can feel Jane Smith staring, looks at her for a second, finds himself making a transparency of her, imagines the floral clad body crouching, pallid, in the rose bushes. Lingering. Then her outline is slithering over the backyard, the slinky shadow crawling up the steps of the veranda, where Ellen waits. She touches Ellen, and floral teal turns into basic black, a perfect fit. *Ellen isn't some kind of vampiress, some scissor wielding night shadow, some Mrs. Bobbit. Maybe the patient was having an affair with the doctor's wife. By accident*, he hears Ellen saying. *By mistake*. The words bounce with the basketball off its backboard. Barrie catches the glare of the orange Speedo suit out of the corner of his eye.

He moves his hand to the barbecue panel, turns the knob on the right. He is still over the fence when a loud pop releases the blue wall of flame from the barbecue pit, shutting out the Smith' s yard, walling him in. Barrie finds himself falling against the house, slamming into the vinyl siding. There is a sharp stinging under his chin, a singeing pang beneath his crisp eyebrows. He can smell the parched reality of burnt

hair, can feel the eyes of everyone upon him, dissecting him, their expressions altering with the silly-putty assuredness of a slow motion picture.

"Kevin - my God," Ellen is saying. "My God," she says again, mouth open wide, like a cavern.

The Mrs. Bobbits of the world were genetic mishaps, they were born as infrequently as nuclear accidents. It had to be the doctor's wife.

"Kevin," Ellen says, as if to a child who is testing the limits of a swing set.

Barrie is stuck. *There had to be a woman in there somewhere.*

Underground

"This is it - 457 Elm - that's what you said, right?"

Thea looked through the dust smoked glass of the car, recognized the crumpled geraniums, dead, though neat in their flower pots, the porch light bright on the white trim of the door. The upper windows were dark, the lamp steady behind the bay window, like she'd left it.

"Yes. This is the one."

As she paid the driver, he made a remark, on the peculiarity of seeing flowers dried up like that, in their beds - most people watered them in the fall, he said. They needed extra care this late in the season, he said. So she hadn't bothered to pluck them out yet. Or maybe she just liked them that way, crisp, preserved, statuesque. It was none of his business. The nosy prick.

Making her way along the walk, Thea lit a cigarette, inhaled parched air, shivered. As she moved into the cool shadow of the house, she couldn't help feeling a pang of longing for the recently discarded cloak of drunkenness. But she knew drinking was ultimately useless, David always managing to make his way into her alcoholic haze, hover over her like some new wave prisoner in a concentration camp, shirtless,

torso bleached against dirt and surrounding barbed wire - one arm flashing a shocking brand that read *Faggot*. He was trapped within a group of people some claimed were foreigners, part of something that made him a target for ignorance. But *she* hadn't asked to be part of the conspiracy, the cover-up, had no interest in the politics of the situation. It wasn't guilt propelling the image along, some Freudian submarine shooting signals out from her subconscious. She'd just seen the image of the tattooed arm in a United Colors of Benetton ad once, and it still held the same sickly awe for her. Thea stood in the porch light, smoking, seeing how long she could inhale. She could hear the rush of cars on the avenue, a block over, then an ambulance siren shrieking. Through the bay window, she recognized David's latest passion, a grey-spined book on Canadian Tort Law - it seemed to be his obsession anyway, being invited to the dinner table, into the bathtub, eventually accompanying them to bed. Not that it was a disruption. She was conscious of the pane of glass that separated her from the glow of the living room, the clenching fingers of the night air tripping her up, catching her in a moment of lust for heat, a moment of greed. She wanted to crawl back into the warmth of the taxi, hear the radio spitting music, the poor speaker system vibrating with too much treble, excessive static. She wanted to see the streetlamps streaking white, lights blurring through the side window of the taxi, as the driver took her back downtown - back to Jacob's sparsely furnished apartment, techno booming out of the portable stereo, blue light from the Italian restaurant filtering in neon from the side street. Thea was in Jacob's kitchen, could feel the counter top under her buttocks, its coolness fighting with Jacob's breath as his tongue lunged between her breasts, his palm sliding between her legs. She wanted to do it over. This time she wouldn't jerk her head back suddenly when he found the right place, banging her left temple off the kitchen cupboard. She wouldn't act like some widow, struck frigid by the resurfacing of her own hormones. There was no reason for her not to give in to it, she thought to herself. The teasing had gone on long enough- she was surprised Jacob hadn't blown her off. She wanted to do it over so she could see if she might have the guts to go through with it this time. See if she had the nerve to actually get laid.

The cigarette was burning the filter before Thea went in the front door, dropped her coat, and went up to the tiny bedroom. There was a crack of light sneaking in from the bathroom. He must have left it on for her, she thought - damn him. She slipped off her shoes, threw her dress on the bureau chair, keeping her eyes from the bed. She could hear him breathing and had to wonder who she'd be running from that night - snipers from the underground, the mafia, enemy tanks - maybe something more explicit - a dream with David holding a gun to her head, or rigging up some perfect killing apparatus - a gun hinging on a chairback with wires connecting the trigger to the French- door handle. One time David had blown away the mailman, another time it was Thea's taxi driver, opening the door for her as she headed out for one of her excursions. Thea went to the toilet to vomit.

When she was finished, she went to the bed, slipped under the bulk of the comforter, surprised at how close David was to her side of the mattress. She studied the delicate slope of his nose, the straight line of his brows, the unlined forehead leading to the soft crop of blond hair. He looked like a drawing in the indigo darkness, a figure devoid of troubles, of incongruity. Damn him for looking so sweet, she thought. But then anything could look innocent in sleep - a Jaguar, a panther. Maybe even the devil.

The first time Thea saw David was through the evening light of a department store window. It was late January and she was walking in the snow, past Harry Rosen when she was distracted by a Mafia-style hat perched on the head of a mannequin. The hat's appeal faded with a glance at its price tag, but she still found herself drawn to the glass, registering a man chuckling at himself in a full length mirror. Thea watched the man's brows rising in disbelief as a saleswoman tugged at the hem of his trousers and then stood to point to something out of view. Thea had worked at Tip Top for a couple of semesters during university, knew the trousers were o.k., but thought the

jacket was too stiff, boxy. As she moved out of the mellow street and into the florescent assault of the shop, Thea decided that this was a guy worth saving.

Inside she poked around in the scarves, then started trying on the hats. She liked the ones with the low brims, subdued colors. She put on a grey with burgundy trim and walked over to the mirror next to her chosen recipient of good deeds. She pushed the hat forward, then tipped it back on her head.

"What do you think?" she said.

"Hmm?" He was startled out of studying his trouser leg, smiled a little shyly.

"Do you like?" Thea kept her eyes moving, pretended to be concerned about the effect of the hat.

"Oh, it's nice. Very European," he said, apparently relieved at having come up with anything at all.

"Yeah?" Thea turned to face him with a smile. "Well thanks - hey, how are you making out?"

"Oh, I don't know - these sales people, they make me nervous. I'm not used to this kind of attention."

"You don't think I believe that."

He looked genuinely confused by the remark and Thea wondered if it was possible that this guy could actually have no idea he was striking.

"You must be an actor or something - and you know, you're good."

He flushed a little. "No, nothing like that. I'm working at a law firm for now."

"For now? What, you on the move or something?"

"No, no. I'm just articling - a joe boy basically. You try not to get too optimistic about being offered a position."

"That right?" Thea said.

"Uh huh." He turned in the mirror, studying the pants over his shoulder. He had a nice ass - tight, athletic.

Thea could tell this one was going to be a hard sell. A little on the conservative side. She went back to the hats to dispose of the fedora, pulled out a ball point and

wrote her name and number on a sales ticket. Then she went back over, said, "Hey - uh, hey - what's your name again?"

She was selling him a line, and he knew it. Thea could tell by the side glance. "It's David."

"Well, David, thanks for your help with the hat."

He stopped investigating his hem, looked a little concerned that she might be leaving. "The? Oh, yeah, sure. You think this is all right?"

Thea smiled, knowing she'd played him perfectly, though he did have her worried for the smallest second. She stepped closer, walked around him, scrutinizing, as if she really hadn't considered. Then she stopped behind him, looking past him into the glass, distracted him by making a pull at the left shoulder of the jacket, snuck her number into the trousers. "I like the pants," she said, stroking her chin, playing the consumed connoisseur. "You want to stick around that firm though, so I'd lose the jacket."

The first time they had sex, Thea was a little stunned. They'd known each other three weeks and ten dates, and finally it had been long enough, and she refused to turn the lights on after inviting him into the house, didn't pull back when his hand found its way up the front of her sweater. She led him up the stairs to her bedroom where she turned on the stereo, took the scented candle from the dresser and held it up to her cigarette, taking a drag to light the wick. He was shy with his hands, holding her around the small of her back as he kissed her. She peeled off her own sweater but he finished undressing her, awkwardly catching the zipper on the fabric of her skirt, and trying to unfasten her bra in the back instead of the front.

The moment hadn't come too quickly but David had. The undressing took longer than the finessing. Intercourse lasted for all of two minutes and afterwards David felt obligated to apologize for the fact he was a virgin. He'd never found the right girl, he said, was always focussing on school and didn't have a lot of opportunities.

Thea didn't need to hear it. But she found it surprising he was *that* inexperienced. She'd had several mediocre lovers before, but they were usually the ones who had been in three year relationships - Thea had been amazed that any woman hadn't been able to teach them more than they knew in that long of a time.

"How many guys have you been with?" he said. David was propped up on one elbow, smiling, twirling a lock of her hair around the fingers of his free hand.

She looked at him in the candle-lit room, pulling the sheet up over her breasts.

"Thea?" he said, as if she hadn't heard.

"What?" she wondered if he might rephrase it this time.

"I mean - you must have *done* it before-"

"Why?" she said.

"If you could just bottle that-"

"You just said you were a virgin," she said. "Why couldn't I be?"

He laughed. "Yeah, right."

"Oh - I see - maybe you'd just like to roll over and open your wallet. Maybe you have some special requests for next time-"

"Hey," he said. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm not trying to say I think you're promiscuous or something."

"What if I am?" she said. "What if I did my whole fine arts class?"

"Thea," he said. "I know you're not like that - I think you're great."

"You don't *know*." Why were men always assuming they knew everything about a person, she thought.

He was staring at her. "Where is this coming from?" he said. "I didn't think I was being an asshole or anything. It was just a question - I was just curious about your boyfriends, is all. I just wondered if you'd really cared about anybody enough to stay with them for a long time - anyway nowadays you almost have to know that kind of stuff, with AIDS and everything out there - "

"We *used* a condom," she said. She'd had to adjust it after David put it on because he hadn't pinched the end before he'd unrolled it, to get the air out. Thea

could feel her guard enclosing her, couldn't push the feeling of resentment away. There was a time when she'd taken chances, when she wouldn't have bothered. Like with Gary - her *first love* - it was hard to believe she used to think of him in such a revolting way. But he had her pretty snowed and she didn't think things out then. Gary hated condoms, said it didn't *feel* the same. He'd managed to get someone else pregnant while he was living with Thea. Fuck that, she thought. Now she was careful about using them, didn't need one breaking on her. *She* didn't need to add abortion to her personal relationship resume.

"I thought it was o.k. to ask." He was humouring her now.

"It's not exactly the greatest time for inquiries," she said.

"Look - I'm sorry, o.k?" Now he sounded defensive.

She looked at David, the tightened facial lines, recognized the endearing frown. She couldn't help smiling. She'd just been this guy's *first*. There wasn't any hope in hell he'd have any post-relationship baggage, and it would be pretty hard for him to be disappointed, having no one to compare her to. He probably thought she was a goddess or something, wasn't trying to put her in her place. "No, David," she said. "I'm being the idiot. It's a fair question - it's just that, well - let's just say my boyfriends haven't exactly been one-woman-men." The truth was they'd usually been users, and Thea thought of most of them as being completely fucked.

David traced his finger gently up and down her arm, apparently relieved the nerve he'd hit was easing up. "Your luck's about to change," he said.

The marriage didn't change the feel of the relationship, not really. Thea still found its texture pleasing, with the exception of occasional snags - instances she began to think of as David's *moments*, instances when his expression would just glaze over, or he'd drop her hand, being distracted. Thea never knew what to make of this, noticing it for the first time six weeks after the wedding, the time she'd invited him home for a picnic lunch, wrapping herself in a checked Italian cloth - she was the appetizer. It

was after they made love that he seemed dissatisfied, saddened as he stood in the window in the amber light of June.

Thea decided this was a symptom of the failure to hit what David considered the big town, submitting a summer application to a firm in Vancouver, barely eating for weeks, only to be denied an interview. She wondered if he felt her to be unsympathetic, had visited Vancouver herself and knew Edmonton's business community was efficient enough, but mechanical, having nothing to compare to the rocket of growth booming on the west coast. Even during the recession, Vancouver streets pulsated with vigour, steady streams of bodies flooding the walks, a rush of life. Maybe he thought she couldn't relate, maybe that was why he'd shut her out, not even telling her about any of it until she'd seen him with the rejection letter. It was more likely that he just didn't want to get her hopes up.

The phone wasn't ringing off the hook for *her* either, even though she'd targeted at least a dozen galleries and half as many high schools, trying to market her M.A. in Fine Arts. She hadn't really gotten into any personal projects either, so she began painting a mural in the bedroom, a Vancouver skyscape, using a post-card as a reference. She scaled the chrome, angular buildings against a midnight sky, paying particular tribute to a piece of ocean that made its way in between the hotels and the office district, extended the horizon off the wall to include the ceiling, using a simple roller. She set off the intensity of the black by stringing several lines of tiny white Christmas lights over nails on the ceiling. It was a queer thing to get used to at first, and took a week to do, Thea getting away with hiding it by telling David she was refinishing the hardwood floor - she said she was sanding it first, and they'd have to sleep in the spare room to avoid the dust. When she showed it to him, one evening after dinner, he stood silent for several minutes in the doorway, apparently in amazement. He dropped his overcoat and stepped slowly toward the mural, hesitating, as if he thought it might disappear.

He inspected it thoroughly, even discoverting a last minute touch, a microscopic *BMW* idling toward the suburbs.

"Do you like it," she said."I thought after I started that it might make you miserable, that you might misunderstand-"

"No - I didn't want you to think - I mean - I'm happy here," he said.

"Do you like it?" she said again. He stood looking at her, as though she had turned a different way in the light and he'd seen something out of the ordinary.

"It's a bit weird, I guess," she said. "I hope you like doing it under the stars."

"Aren't you worried someone might beam me up?" he said, smiling.

David's moments continued, only by late summer, they were turning into hours, huge gaps in their life together. When put on the spot, he was beginning to rely on the articling position as an excuse, saying it kept him distracted almost continuously . It was the cliched lie that Thea had come to associate with dicking around in her ex-boyfriends. David kept saying the work at the firm was new, the partners very demanding.

"They expect a lot from me," he said.

"Screw what they expect," she said. "What should *I* expect? Dick all? The occasional breakfast? The kind of sex I could expect from a kid working at a McDonald's drive through- "

"Would you just relax," he said. "Why do you always have to hit everything at 300 miles an hour?"

"Fast and easy - high in calories, low in nutrition - but consider the price - ve-ry affordable-"

"Thea -"

"Why don't I just relax," she said, scratching her head, like this was some simple solution she'd never considered before. "Yes, Thea, I think you're being very unreasonable expecting dick from your husband. What *you* need to do is simply relax,

have an Egg McMuffin, take it all in - the whole 60 seconds of it."

"You don't have to ruin everything," he said quietly, into his coffee.

"Sure," she said. "Ruin everything - " She could hear her voice rising, accelerating like a vehicle fueled by exasperation.

"Is that how you've felt," he said, speaking low. "Like I'm just some kid, some teenager -is that how it is for you - with me? I'm just a one minute ride. A useless lay?"

Thea looked at him, the carefully knotted tie in the shirt she'd ironed for him. She looked at the anger in the blue eyes and knew that she had hurt him, had gone too far, cheapened everything by forgetting his innocence. He was an intense lover, could pull her in the wake of something beyond language, when he put himself into it. "Oh, God, David," she said. "That wasn't what I meant-" She moved toward him and he moved the same distance away, as if displaced, a buoy escaping on water. "David, I'm sorry."

His eyes avoided her, focusing intensely on the kitchen window. She could see the defeat in the sloped shoulders.

"It really wasn't what I meant," she said. She didn't know how she wasn't crying, was somehow beyond herself.

"I have to go to work," he said, but not to be mean, she thought.

"Can I make dinner? Will you come?" she said.

He looked at her, took her hand like someone that didn't deserve it. "I'll try to make it by seven," he said.

That night Thea sat in front of the television, drinking wine, the dinner still warming in the oven until ten thirty. It wasn't until eleven, and the wine bottle was empty that she could admit that he wasn't coming. She eyed the phone, gave it dirty looks as if it was screening the calls, was some evil thing keeping her from the rest of the world, from what she needed to live.

"You're liking this," she said to it, the alcohol tingling at the base of her neck, warming her skin under the light blouse. "You're on his side, aren't you?" Thea was surprised to hear her voice in the darkness of the empty house, might have been

frightened by herself if she hadn't found all of it so remarkably funny. She was drunk and she knew it, knew that she was a stupid drunk, an infrequent drinker. She stood in the bay window, looking out at the trees across the street, at the leaves dancing as the birch branches bent to the wind. She stood there formulating bizarre excuses for her own husband, defending him to a grey cat that was making its descent from a tree. "You think he's having an affair, don't you," she said to the cat. "Everyone always thinks their husband is having an affair. People are sin-clical - cyn - cynical people. David's working - to pay for things. To pay for this house," she said, the cat retreating into the neighbour's hedge. And as she looked out, she could feel the mocking eyes of the cat, icy, glinting silver, and for a moment, the walls of the house completely disappeared and she stood, naked, with the lean saplings in the yard, stripped of things familiar and protective.

Thea started awake as though someone had slapped her, realized the phone was almost under her on the sofa. "You couldn't even let me sleep," she said to it, squinting into the light that invaded the living room from the street. Her head felt light, her body slushy but weightless, and she remembered she'd gotten loaded. Because David hadn't come home. David. Oh, my God, she thought - the phone was torturing her, teasing. Someone was calling in the middle of the night when her husband wasn't home. She could imagine the officer's voice on the other end of the line - *I'm sorry ma'am but his car just sped out of control, crossed the meridian into an oncoming semi* - or, *Died of a gunshot to the chest . . . found him with his mistress . . . her boyfriend must have found out, come over and shot the two of them in their sleep. Could you come and identify the body? We feel your pain . . . terrible tragedy. Ma'am?*

The phone kept up its steady report - Thea knew she couldn't beat it.

"Hello," she said. She didn't hear anything. If it was a heavy breather she'd trace the call and go over and rip his sinuses out. "Hello?"

"Thea? Thea - it's me-"

"David?"

In her stupor it was like getting a call from a movie star - the voice she thought was beyond her.

"Yeah, honey - God, I'm sorry, but I fell asleep on my desk at the office - I just woke up now and realized-"

"What time is it?" she said. "Do you know what the time is?"

"It's two - Thea, I'm really sorry."

"It's two. Nothing on tv at two in the morning, I don't think," she said. "I missed Letterman already. Did you know, Dave, there's this cat out front before, see, and I really thought it was trying to tell me something-"

"Thea - are you alright?"

"Sure, because you're not dead - that was the phone's story - but the cat on the other hand, he might have something, you know?"

"Christ, woman, you're smashed. Tree'd right out of your mind."

"Nope," she said, "Never was much of a drinker."

"Jesus - is that *all* it is? Booze? You're just whacked. You aren't taking muscle relaxants any more, are you? Shit, you'll kill yourself."

Thea had sprained her back in the spring, right before the engagement, had been on prescription drugs for a few weeks. "Naw - I just had some wine with dinner."

"You get into bed," he said. "Go right to bed. I'll be home soon, o.k.?'

"Sure," she said. Anything would be o.k.

"Bye," he said.

Thea said "I love you," after she hung up.

In the morning Thea woke up flushed, sweaty, on the sofa, the sun streaking over the carpet, bright in her eyes. She sat up slowly, thought somebody had broken in the house and whacked her over the head, then saw the wine bottle, empty, disregarded, realized she'd given herself a beating.

"You play, you pay," she said, standing, going for the blinds. Who was the

imbecile that made up that sanctimonious line, she thought. She wasn't even in the game last night. She could have taken a cab down to David's office, asked the security guard if anyone was working late if she'd been half conscious. As it was, she'd let him get away with it, couldn't even search his pockets, the way characters did in soap operas, since David hadn't come home, discarded his clothes somewhere, carelessly, for inspection. He wouldn't come home and leave her on the sofa, drunk; it was the perfect opportunity for him to waltz in with the sun in the a.m., carry her up to bed and shut the drapes, tell her it was just 2:30. Yes she'd screwed up.

Thea paced the living room, overcoming nausea with panic, wringing her brain for some reason for his behaviour. She caught her own smile in the silver-framed wedding picture, blond curls just dark enough to be visible over the collar of the simple ivory dress, irises held close to her bosom, just a hint of pencil on her eyes, the glow of her cheek coming from inside, a testimony to her joy, at that moment. Maybe she wasn't pretty enough, she thought. Maybe she had put on weight, she wondered, bending forward, pressing her crumpled skirt over her thighs. Damn you, David, she thought. It isn't me.

Thea leaned over the toilet for several minutes, heaving, but not throwing up. She wasn't used to alcohol pushing her this far toward illness and figured it had to be a major case of nerves. She washed her face, avoiding the bathroom mirror, dressed, and headed straight for the garden. Maybe it was the house, perhaps if she painted the siding - who was she kidding. They could be at the White House, for all he cared.

She decided to finish planting the geraniums, to put some petunias and snap dragons in the flower pots, keep the red geraniums separate from the pink. The red ones would go in right up against the bay windows, so they could be seen at night, in the light from the porch. That would look very smart, she decided. August was late to be planting anything, but Thea wanted to keep the plants in the garage over winter in the hopes that David would get started on the greenhouse they wanted. She went to the garage, started filling the clay pots with soil she'd bought several months earlier, letting the loose earth run over one hand as it fell from the bag. It was cool, soothing

on her skin, smelled rich like new beginnings, something that would spill out of a lake in the blooming light of early morning.

After she'd filled them, she dragged the pots out to the drive, making one trip for each cardboard bound plant, setting them next to their proposed designation, wanting to make sure she set the colors off in the best way possible.

As she worked, she found herself thinking of the irises, delicate against the ivory of her dress in the photograph, the subtle sweetness of their smell in the tiny room where the ceremony took place. She'd set some in a vase, placed them on the windowsill, next to the mahogany book shelves, wanting to remember something sensual, something besides the simple vows. There had been irises another time, she thought, after. The last weekend in July. David must have bought them, set them in their neat vases along the pool side. That was the night he took her to his parent's home while they were away, in San Francisco. He'd blindfolded her in the car, walked her out slowly through the back gate around midnight. He must have waited so late so the wind would be down, she thought. Next to each vase, there were lit candles, rippling beads of white fire playing off the water in the swimming pool.

The two of them swam, naked, easy, laughing, pulling one another under, slithering together like fish, splashing like dolphins. After a while Thea hung from the edge of the tiles by one elbow, pushing back wet hair, watching David's body under the water, droplets of light splintering into electric eels as he broke the surface, shooting like lightning. There was the steady clip of his hand cupping the water as he swam, the splashing, soft like music, the arc of his shoulders. For a second, she looked away, up, at the blackness of the sky, the leaves of the elm leaning over, drawn in light, and then David was beside her, under the water, circling, but not touching her. He came up, drawing air, smiling, circled her nipples with his fingers, bit her lower lip, touched her tongue with his own, hands conversing with her body. Then he was darting away again.

When they sat by the pool, wrapped in towels smelling of detergent, David was quiet, moving away again, serious.

"Does it ever just scare the hell out of you?" he said.

"What?" she said. He didn't usually say anything when he had that look.

"This," he said. "Everything. Are you ever scared - I mean right down in the pit of your stomach - scared you just might wake up one day and find it's all left you - everything you know."

"I'm not sure," she said. "Everyone is scared of something."

"I'm talking like maybe one day you just wake up right? You just wake up and you're going to go out the front door - only it's snowed overnight. It's snowed so much you can't get out - it's like six feet deep."

Thea was watching him, his eyes, candles making the pupils indigo instead of blue.

"So you go to the back door instead - and there's no snow there, but just this open space, wide open, blank fields. And you take a step, and it's damn hard, but you're walking - but you have to relearn everything, wipe it out, do it all different."

"David, what are you talking about?" she said.

He turned to face her, the candle light hollowing out the caverns under his cheekbones. "What would you do?" he said.

"What would I do when?"

"If you woke up and found the walk snowed in, so you couldn't go out the front of the house?"

"I'd get the shovel, silly - I'd climb out the window with it and shovel off the sidewalk."

David exhaled, like a weightlifter, then picked her up and threw her into the pool.

Thea worked steadily over the flower pots, scooping out mounds of earth with her hands, stooping over the plants, wiping the sticky plant excrement on her jeans.

The sun had been hot on her neck but now the wind rippled under her t-shirt, reminding her it was getting cold, late. She stood, her back hestitating like an unused hinge, squinted at the sun, the light abandoning her, retreating under the threads of soft clouds, pink clouds draped like bed linen. She turned around and looked over the eave at the upstairs window, saw the liquid reflection of the sunset there. She had never spent an afternoon in the bedroom, was used to seeing it lit with the manufactured stars, the lines of tree lights, in the heart of night. She could imagine the frail gaudiness of the bulbs in the glare of daylight, the thick shine of the black paint. The flowers were definitely better, she thought, turning to the delicate blooms, wind tossing their heads from side to side. It was just then that she realized they would die whether she planted them or not.

As the sun drifted away Thea thought of David - she had no idea where he was at that moment, no idea whether he could see the waves of crimson, the sun floating away, steady, determined. And instantly her heart fell, dragged her down beneath the sod. Thea touched death, the end of life as she pursued it. And then she thought again of David's words, the image of snow flooding the walkway, defying penetration, the need to explore a place completely new, alone - head out the back way. How could she have been so stupid, she thought. Even then he was leaving her, finished with their life together, their home.

Then she was moving across the lawn, hurrying through the front door, into the living room, tiny clumps of earth tumbling onto the carpet, spiralling into black starfish. She looked for the clock, saw that it was already eight, glanced reluctantly at the answering machine. No calls. Her boots thumped over the hardwood floor, squeaked over the linoleum, sticky fingers staining the bits and pieces stuffed into the kitchen drawers, the receipt tapes from the supermarket, match books collected from Safeway, Boston Pizza. Thea knew it was useless to call the office, demand to know where David was - they wouldn't tell her and she could already feel them smirking, triumphant that she was panicking. Another wife unable to satisfy the middle class professional man, unable to keep him coming back for more. *Men fake orgasm too, you know, can't always*

get it up for their wives, but are always up for it. If there's another woman, chances are, it's not her that's particularly attractive, it's your marriage that's fucked. The last word would have been *bleeped* out, the *f* word not being allowed on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. *Three months,* she could hear her friends saying. *Three months isn't long enough to know someone before marriage. Fuck you,* she thought. More sanctimonious crap. It had been her boyfriends who'd always fucked around, she thought - developing these convenient ex-girlfriends half-way into the relationship, deciding to get back togther with Cheryl or Deirdre or whoever - *give things another try.* Thea was left with a lot of unfinished relationships because of this, her number of sexual partners being out of the category of what any mother would deem respectable - any man either. Thea's friends in university used to call her the jerk magnet. No guy was going to make her feel promiscuous because she'd been unlucky with the men she'd attracted. She'd never tell anyone the *real* number.

Thea built several tiny mountains of receipts on the counter top, poked through the tea cups, flipped randomly through the phone book, knowing she sometimes wrote things, numbers, addresses, on the top of an open page. When she was finished with the kitchen, she invaded the bedroom, attacked the neat row of trousers hanging in the closets, found nothing. The bureau was empty, most of David's shirts in the hamper. She went back down to investigate the front closet, passed over the shoes in favour of inspecting the four jackets, ravaged the pockets. She found one receipt, a Visa bill, dated March 1st, total of thirty three fifty typed onto the paper, a tip of five dollars and fifty cents scrawled in after, in pen, changing the total to thirty-nine dollars. It had to be a restaurant bill or a bar tab. There was no name on the slip, just an address.

By ten Thea was in the back of a cab, heading across the 109th Street bridge, the address being just south of Jasper.

"You got no name for this place?" the driver said.

"No, just the address I gave you," she said.

"An' you never been here before?" he was looking at her like she was a calculus problem.

"I'm in a hurry," she said. She only had twenty dollars in her purse.

"So - you tell me," he said. He jerked the car to the side, glared out his window. "Same to you, you piece of shit," he said. "Some of these people, they drive like they got jelly beans up their ass. Total assholes."

"We almost there?"

"Yah - So you tell me, why you wanna go to this place - you don't even know what it is."

To find my husband with some whore, she thought. She was quiet.

The address was marked on a door with a crisscross of mesh bars on it, a piece of paper barely visible underneath, the words, *Yes, this is the Underground*, done in some weird calligraphy. Thea noticed the heel prints denting the metal below the small window, hoped it wasn't some strip bar or something, some gang hangout. She pulled the handle and was confronted by immediate blackness, music so loud her chest seemed to be beating to it. She let the door wham shut behind her, stood leaning against it, eyes adjusting until she could make out a narrow stairway in the purple light, catch pulsating beams of light shooting up the walls. She went down the stairs, carefully - had put on her heels, even done her hair. If she was going to catch David dicking around she wasn't going to do it looking like some slug out of the garden. She wanted it to be clear who the slimeball was.

In the basement, bodies vibrated on the dancefloor, movements exaggerated, frozen, then liquid in the techno lighting. People groped each other in corners, or stood up against the rails by the dancers, alone, smoking, cradling drinks. It was much darker than the bars Thea was used to, most of the people wearing black, or white, or not wearing much of anything. Two women on the dance floor caught her eye, one a striking blond, hair done in a french roll, skirt just covering her buttocks, mesh stockings torn in places, the other, tiny, breasts half exposed, wearing short hair, and leggings. They were facing one another, the blond flicking her pelvis, the brunette dancing low, knees bent, stroking her partner's thigh. The two silhouettes came together then, the light evaporating between them. *Shit*, Thea thought. They were

necking.

Thea walked over to get a drink, put her elbows on the bar, tried to look relaxed. She was thankful she'd chosen to wear a black dress, though the long hem made her conspicuous. She pulled off her pearl necklace and slid it into her purse.

"What can I get you?" the bartender said. He was wearing a black mock turtle neck, jeans.

Thea read his lips more than she heard him. She leaned toward him. "Long Island Iced Tea."

"We don't serve cocktails," he said.

"Oh - uh - wine?"

He shook his head.

"Beer - Molson Dry." They had to have that.

The bartender reached under the counter for the glass, poured her beer. He was watching her as he twisted off the cap, looking her over.

She gave him a five dollar bill and moved away, not waiting for change. She saw a stool over in a corner out of the light, sat down, put her beer on the edge of the bar. She was next to the men's can, the light from the bathroom flooding out, carrying bulky shadows as men cruised in and out, smoking, laughing. Thea didn't know what she was waiting for, knew there was a one in three billion chance she'd find David here on this particular night.

"Hey, you forgot your change."

Thea looked to the man behind the bar. He was at her elbow, but didn't seem to be paying attention to her, so she went back to her drink, the bathroom silhouettes.

"Hey."

She looked over again, and this time the bartender was smiling, holding out a five. "You forgot your change," he said.

"I gave you a five."

"Nope - it was a ten," he said. He was smiling, trying to look candid, but was mischievious.

Thea looked at the bill, took it from his hand. "Thanks," she said. "You have a cigarette I could buy off you?" She used to offer money for smokes in campus bars, found guys would always push her quarter away, give them to her - free, if you didn't count the occasional over pushy comeon.

The bartender flipped back his hair, reached under the bar. Thea recognized the red and white of a DuMaurier package and was relieved she wasn't going to have to choke on Camels or something. He drew one out of the package and handed it to her, flicked open a lighter. "The smoke is free," he said. "I'll trade you a light for your name."

Christ, she thought, what soap opera was this guy studying from. "It's Natasha," she said.

"Natasha - hi." He took her hand, half shook it. "I'm Jacob."

She smiled, as he went to serve a guy in a black leather jacket, head shaved, arm supporting a woman wearing death pale foundation, black hair. She looked past the dance floor, over by the pool tables, scanning the people for someone the right height, trying to spot the blonds. She couldn't imagine David here, in neat tie and creased trousers, thought maybe he'd come to play pool. What kind of harlot had he met here, she wondered. Why would he even come to this place.

And then she saw him, darting out of a doorway opposite her, by the entrance, alone. He was carrying a drink, had his jacket over his arm - the brown leather one, his hair looking spikier, gelled, his walk a bit stilted, probably by alcohol. Thea was afraid to breathe, thought the motion would make her swell up, stand out for him like a traffic sign. She didn't want him to stop. He was over at the coat check, talking to someone out of sight. He wouldn't go for the coat check girl, for God's sake. A thin figure appeared from behind the door of the check counter, bolting out, grabbing him around the middle, mussing his hair. They embraced, ducked out of the light, were getting away. Thea was falling, earth plugging her nostrils, limbs becoming loose, falling away. She thought of the flowers, the earth cool in her fists, how she could be buried under them. She thought of the irises and stood up, walked, watched herself walking, to the place where she'd seen David - David and his lover. She saw his back in the coat room,

ten yards away, saw the lover, a man with a black cropped haircut, kissing her husband. *You fucked up bastard,* she thought.

"David," the name came out in a moan, a wail coming out of a trampled animal.

The lovers turned around, David's head turning to reveal a stranger's face. It *was* a stranger. Suddenly Thea felt as though she was watching herself, realized how out of it she was.

"Jesus Christ," Thea said, and ran for the staircase, the music throbbing under her ribs, tearing at her throat.

On the street it was raining. Thea sucked in the wet air, gagging on tears. The word *bi-sexual* shot through her brain like a machete, but that left things way too messy. *Homosexual* kept deflecting it away. Thea couldn't duck any of it. *What the fuck have I gotten myself into,* she thought. She had envisioned David so clearly, had so easily mistaken the stranger for her own husband. The ease with which she'd imagined him there was frightening. It meant that she was no longer willing to defend him, that she was convinced he was making a fool of her, convinced to the point of accepting the possibility that she really knew nothing about him.

What would you do? David's voice was asking. *What would you do if you woke up and found the walk snowed in, so you couldn't get out the front of the house . . .*

"Stop it," she was saying. "Stop it." The rain was on her face, the dampness mixing with the sweat pooling between her breasts. *You go out the back instead . . . and it's damn hard, but you're walking-*

"Shut up," she said.

Have to relearn everything, wipe it all out. . . do it all different. What the hell else could he have been talking about? Having an affair didn't mean wiping out your whole life. Unless he was just thinking that she'd leave *him.* Maybe there was something more, maybe he had a secret. Maybe he'd jumped the coat-check girl at the wedding reception. Now she was pregnant and was blackmailing him for money.

What would you do? What? if you woke up and found the walk snowed in. God, what an idiot she was. *I'd get a shovel and climb out the window, clear it away,* she'd

said. *Get a shovel,* Thea mocked herself in a prissy little voice.

She sat on the step in front of the club, paralyzed by the knowledge that there was no shovel big enough, knowing she couldn't begin to comprehend the magnitude of the thing in her path.

"Christ," she said, to a man hunching along the street with a paper over his bent shoulders. "Jesus H. Christ."

After a while, a cab driver came up and led her to his car, taking her arm gently, as though she were blind, an invalid. She sat in the back seat, sopping wet, like a dish cloth. Only there was a discreet consciousness, a voice pulsating in the back of her head, drawing up moments, old images, spitting into the hushing slurring of the rain under the tires. Something had split her open like a scalpel, poured in this voice and its hunk of coal, lit a piercing fire, an ache that burned on despite the sopping wet tissue paper clothes, the mat of drenched hair.

She was with her parents, sitting in the back of the station wagon, going camping, to Lac La Biche. She wanted a dog so badly, a companion to sit with her when it was too wet to go outside, the poplars hanging like slingshots in the forest. She wanted a dog, but her parents wouldn't buy her one, and so she sat behind them, eyes scanning the shoulder of the highway, searching the blank fields, looking for movement, for some stray, an injured animal, something wounded, that her mother wouldn't be able to turn away. Eventually, a collie made its way into their backyard, at home, all matted, eyes invisible, nose huge and dribbling. They cleaned him up and he was theirs, the owner coming by, saying he'd no use for the dog on the farm, that they could have him. Thea loved him for ten years, until he died. There could be no remorse in loving something until it died. It was when you loved it and it turned on you, tore at what you offered that you could be poisoned, diseased, needed to be ripped open, treated with this dull rock.

But how could he have been so *good,* she wondered. How could she have believed he loved her. It wasn't like they were just buddies or something. She thought guys couldn't fake that shit - the getting excited. She'd heard of them not being able to

get it up, had encountered a lazy one or two back in her dorm room, but never one that was utterly devoid of potential. She thought of David in her bed, inside her, images shuttering through his mind, polaroids flashing, fantasies, two men together, doing it. Maybe that was how he flicked the switch, got the film going. Thea felt the dull burn in her stomach as she tried to digest this, accept that it all had been bullshit. But how else could she explain it. A twenty-six year old virgin who'd lost that virginity only to abandon all interest in sex - after only five months? That just wasn't normal. Thea had had enough experience to know *she* wasn't lacking in the performance department.

She was conscious of the taxi driver for a second, watching her in the rear view, but he was in another movie. *Why had he married her*, she thought. His father was a judge, well known, his mother sociable, to a point. Did *they* know? Did he win some prize for marrying, have to be married by May 16- his twenty-sixth birthday - in order to grab some respectable trust fund. Right before the wedding, he gave her a chocolate cupcake. A little odd, but he insisted she lick off the sprinkles, the top icing. Her tongue hit something bitter, ridged, a key. He'd bought the house Thea was renting. She'd been clueless about that too, but it was a thumbtack compared to this landmine.

"That's ten dollars - hey, you got the money here, or you have to go inside?" the cab driver said.

Thea looked in her purse, took out the bill. She must have gone the scenic route, the driver thinking she was stoned.

"Thanks," he said. "Have a good night."

Go slit your wrists, she thought.

The house was dark, rain spitting from the eaves, the trees restless. Thea's shoes clipped over the linoleum for a second, and then she was on the carpet, climbing the stairway. She had to turn on the light in the bedroom, to be sure he was there, found him asleep, on his back. She looked at the arm draped over the covers, the simple gold wedding band - there was an inscription inside, *loving you, Thea*. There had to be some way to know, she thought. She crawled up from the foot of the bed like a cat, straddling him over the comforter, until she was hovering right over his face, staring

at him. She thought maybe he would wake up, screaming, throw her off the bed, thinking she was trying to kill him, but then smelled the syrupy tint of rum on his lips, knew he was sedated. She tilted her head to one side, caught his bottom lip gently between her teeth, kissed his mouth. He opened his eyes slowly, as if he was unsure who he was going to be looking at, then smiled, as though there was some old joke between them. Then he frowned, trying to move over, pinned by Thea's weight on his chest.

"Thea - what are you doing - soaking wet. Where have you been."

She didn't say anything, looking at her own hands, so close to his throat, like they were someone else's. Her wrists should have been limp. She felt pressure in her sinuses, her ears, like she was bobbing on the surface of a lake, about to drown, relaxed, tired of thrashing around.

"Thea," he said. "What's wrong with you."

"Nothing," she said, sedated, slushy. She started to kiss his neck, slid down on him, pulling away the bedding, pushing her buttocks in the air, running her tongue over his nipples, pulling at the hairs of his chest with her teeth, rocking back up to put her tongue in his mouth. He kissed her back, pushing his hands up under her skirt, running his finger along the elastic, the ridge of her underpants, peeling away the damp stockings. Thea was biting his ear, kissing his forehead, his neck, then moving back again, slowly inching her body downward, his penis hard in the trough between her ribs. She was thrusting her body on him, being careful, pulled up, guided his penis to her with her hand.

"Thea - Thea - stop it," he said. "Stop it." She could hear the trace of panic, as if she were toxic, burning him with her skin. She didn't move and he pushed her off him, sat up, breathing hard, cold awareness there in his eyes, a man who'd just ducked a speeding maniac.

"Can't take it?" she said.

"What?"

"Don't want to have some more fun?"

"What?" he looked at her the same way he did over coffee in the morning, tired. "What the fuck is your-"

"I was at the *Underground*," she said, almost laughing. "Quite the trip - can see why you'd like it."

He stared at her, as if he didn't know her, like her face was a deformity. "Are you trying to say something here? Is there a point?"

"Why don't we use *your* pointer - It's hard for me to picture how you'd do it-"

"Are you on drugs?" he said.

"Yeah," she said. "It's got to be me, always me. I'm demented."

"Either say something or shut up."

"I *said* I was at the *Underground* - I still can't believe it. I mean, do you even *like* me?"

"What?"

"Jesus Christ," she said, backing off the bed, feet sliding down to the carpet. "I *know*. Can't you just stop faking it, for ten minutes?"

He looked like he was going to spit something up. "Who were you talking to?"

"It doesn't take a freaking P.I. to figure it - all you have to do is walk in there - straight - hey, that's a good one-"

He was staring at her, like he'd thrown the ball for the hoop, missed, blown the most important game. "I was going to tell you when I figured it all out."

"You don't figure out shit like that, David."

"I was scared, o.k.? I *am* scared - I didn't want you to leave. *I* don't know what's going to happen."

She was blown away by his selfishness, his keeping her around in case he changed his mind. "Things don't just *happen*. Marriages aren't listed in science text books next to *spontaneous combustion*."

"What are you going to do?" he said.

"*Me*? What the fuck have you been doing? God knows I'm not going to try *that*. What is this, some kind of test?"

He spoke slowly, shifted his gaze to the comforter. "Some days I was all over the place," he said.

"Oh, you were definitely spread thin-"

"I hated myself - but then I was just angry, out of control, hating everything. Now, I know - maybe there wasn't anything I could do differently-"

"So you just let me think you found somebody better."

"It doesn't matter what I do - don't you get it? I can love you, hate your guts - it doesn't matter."

"You can't love me," she said. "You never touch me."

He pulled his knees up, hugging his ankles.

She waited.

"There are days when I think I hate you," he said.

Thea walked away, wondering who these people were who had come in and taken over her marriage.

The next morning, Thea woke up, her neck tight, sore, her arm in a puddle of coffee, the cup overturned at her elbow. Sun was slithering in through the blinds over the kitchen table. She felt starched fabric on her skin, recognized the daze of sleep was undraping her, leaving her naked to the cold blade of recollection, the stab of what didn't seem real. She caught sight of a hand, wondered who it belonged to, remembered the pink of the nail polish, realized she had put it there. She was trapped there, in this body sitting at the kitchen table, in this shell - she was up in the corner of the room, hovering next to the hanging plant, was the eye of the camera, observing, detached. Watching this insane woman, this figure of paralysis, an animal caught in a trap, instincts dead, unable to chew off its own leg, to get away - for her, the distinction between steel and flesh being impossible to make.

She couldn't remember spilling the coffee, couldn't imagine it burning her, way

up there on the ceiling. She was left to follow this character around, seemed capable of writing the screenplay, didn't care what happend with her really, wished she could get away, push beyond the ceiling, work with a different actress. Thea sneezed. *Oh my God*, she thought. *What is happening to me.* She wondered if she was crazy, already.

She looked at the clock, the digital segments of the numbers, pulsating, blurring sideways. She couldn't remember if David had left the house last night, was repulsed by the thought of him, wanted to crawl into a corner, or a closet.

There was a cracking noise, someone walking down the stairs, thumping over the linoleum. She wanted to move, to run out the back door before he found her, but then she wouldn't be able to observe everything, watch the dumb woman in her chair.

David walked into the kitchen, dressed for work, eyes small and red, like the eyes of a pig. He'd seen her from the hall, couldn't stop staring, even though he seemed horrified, like a motorist slowing down to witness a decapitated body on the highway. He wasn't expecting this sort of disfigurement.

He put his hand on her shoulder, hesitating first. She had to look down at the fingers to make sure it was there, his hand so light, a bird resting.

"Are you going to leave?" he said.

She wasn't going to make it easier for him, she knew this.

"If you could just stay until it's sorted out-"

Now it was a paper jam.

"We might be able to help each other."

Thea stared at this selfish man, saw that he was crying, forehead scrunched tight, blotchy. She had never seen him cry before - had never seen any man cry.

He moved away slowly, noiselessly closed the back door.

Thea was losing weight and David was in a panic, insisting she go to the hospital. But he was on the periphery, a margin on her page of existence, was easily

filtered out, disregarded. The scale didn't reveal much of a difference anyway, and her muscle loss was probably just symptomatic of her indulgence in alcohol, her late nights at the *Underground,* the abuse of sleeping pills. She decided to throw the pills away, tried drinking less at the bar. But then she couldn't sleep, and one September morning, when she was making coffee, she fainted, slicing her forehead open on the edge of the counter. She was alarmed by the possibility of a scar, didn't know how she was going to cover the thing up, with makeup, absolutely hated wearing hats. It was dark enough in *the Underground.* Let him think I'm going to the hospital, she laughed to herself. The idea made her want to burst into hysterics. Thea just floated from one room to the next, observing the shell of the woman, watching her drink wine every evening, staring as she tossed back sleeping pills. Like it would matter if she was in perfect health, if she looked voluptuous like Marilyn Monroe. The house was a large tomb, their bed a double coffin.

She thought again of the *Underground,* the detective that had solved the riddle for her, made her pay dearly. She thought of the bodies there, the bleached faces like masks, black limbs reaching out, eroding into the darkness, the way she kept them at arms length. She was tired of being the passive observer, sick of returning to Jacob's old haunt in search of who knew what. It was as if she was expecting to find energy there - some kind of answer. But now she knew there wasn't any way to compromise. She thought of the price she'd paid, and she suddenly wanted revenge. She wanted to inflict some damage, swallow up some of the bodies, derive life from them, float away, grimacing. The idea stabbed a clarity into the fog of the situation, and Thea had to pull back for a moment, to prepare.

She showered, using her perfumed soap, massaged the shampoo into her hair slowly, slipped into a towel after, started applying her makeup, slowly, precisely, as though the process was an operation. She dried her hair with the blower, swept it up, found a red dress in the closet, the one with the bare back, slip of spandex in the fabric - she had't put it on in almost a year.

In the taxi, she said nothing, ignoring the driver. She stepped out into the

street, leaves rustling in the wind as she went for the door, slipped inside quickly, the pounding of the music waking her, beating life into her chest. Figures floated around her, moons of faces looking, slips of smiles glowing sometimes, appreciating her. The ledge of the bar was alive, arms curled around drinks, heads bobbing for kisses, a woman leaning over, riding it like it was a surfboard, hair draped over the inside counter, chin level with the the bartender's abdomen. Thea felt a splinter of contempt for the woman as she watched her give Jacob a carefully placed kiss, along with some bills. Jacob wasn't exactly fighting it, smirking like an eighteen year old. Or was he laughing *at* her, enjoying the feeble attempts at flirting, at the exaggerated hair flipping, the smily chewing on a cocktail straw. Thea noticed the heavy blush stroked over the round cheeks, the dull yellow shine of dyed hair. The woman wasn't pretty. Thea knew what Jacob liked. She stood at the end of the bar and waited for him to come over.

He smiled as he stood in front of her, though she almost wished that he didn't know her, didn't remember. He would be expecting the usual routine. But tonight she wasn't interested in being predictable. She bent to his ear, ordered a rum and coke, smelled his Drakar cologne fighting with the smoke. She asked for a cigarette, didn't look away when he looked her in the eye, smiled in thanks after he'd lit it. She paid for her drink, leaving a 50 cent tip, and then sat on a high backed stool, facing the bar.

She sat there, collecting glasses, studying the people, wasn't bothered for a while. She knew it would be a while before Jacob could take off, and she was trying to pace herself, to suppress her anticipation. When she was biting the straw of her third rum and coke, a woman came up and complimented her on her hair. Thea smiled and went back to her drink, and the woman asked her if she had a cigarette. Thea took a drag on the one she was smoking, blew the smoke out in a line, smiled, said *I don't smoke.*

The woman sneered and walked away.

When she was on her fourth, Jacob told her he liked her dress. After she'd finished her fifth she told him she was tired of wearing it.

Thea led Jacob up the narrow staircase, out the door, into the windy street, his hand in the small of her back, on her buttocks as they stopped for the traffic, ran in between the parade of cars. She was deaf out in the night, chest aching from the pounding or the music, back tight under Jacob's hand, senses roaring, defying the hush of the alcohol.

Inside his apartment, she fell against the door, breaking as Jacob's fingers slid up, under her dress, pushed her breasts together. She went for his neck, biting it between groping with her tongue, inhaling the odour of his skin, her body warming, tingling. This time he penetrated her, tore her inhibitions to pieces. And for a moment, David disappeared.

Thea was still floating when she called the taxi from the phone in Jacob's lobby. She noticed a long run in the leg of one stocking, was conscious of a loud throbbing in her ears. The pounding kept her awake in the cab, the driver a million miles off, unable to reach her through her cloud of intoxication. Thea wasn't sure if it was the alcohol or the exhaustion that allowed her a moment of self satisfaction.

When she put her key in the door, she felt a bizarre surge of strength, the reemergence of a spiritual artillery. She walked inside the house, to the living room, inspected the dust covered wedding portrait, saw the irises still blooming there, shiny with water droplets. She picked up the frame, surprised by the weight of it, studied David's eyes in the picture, covered his mouth with her finger, trying to decide if his eyes were smiling. It was hard to tell.

Then he was standing behind her - she could see his reflection in the glass of the photo. She opened the drawer by the mantle and put it away.

"What happened?" he said.

She turned to face him, noticed his hair was messed, like he'd been sleeping on one side.

"Thea? "

"What?" she said.

"God, what the hell happened to you? You look like you've been run over-"

She felt this gut urge to giggle. She put her hand up to her mouth.

"Did you find out something? Did you see a doctor earlier?"

"Whatever for?" she said. The coffee table was dusty. She drew a happy face in it.

David sank into a chair, raked his hair with his hands, studied her like he was on the bench, next to the basketball court, summing up his opponent.

"There's nothing wrong," she said.

"Thea - ignoring it won't make it go away," he said.

She looked at him - did he know, had he followed her? Was he stalking her now?

"We have to talk about it," he said. "Maybe we can get some counseling -there's a group-"

Thea knew she couldn't leave him. He'd have to be the one to go. "I feel perfectly fine about it," she said.

"What?"

"If I can't get if from you, I'll get it somewhere else," she said.

The look on his face told her she'd made a mistake, that he really didn't know. "Oh, Jesus," he said. "Oh, God, what have you done?"

"It's got nothing to do with you," she said.

"Nothing to do - you're supposed to be my wife for fuck's sake - "

She heard a sick laugh coming out of her throat - as if it mattered.

"Damn you-"

"What do you care - " She turned to the bay window, looked out at the burnt lawn, the brown leaves corroding patches of the flower bed.

"You can't be serious-"

"Dead serious." The words clipped out, like her shoes on the linoleum.

"You're out there - you're actually running around out there, getting - . Christ,

are you out of your mind?"

Thea looked at him in the window, the tree branches outside chopping up his reflection. What the hell was he talking about. He was the one who screwed her.

"Did you use a condom?"

"What?" What kind of question was that.

"Did you?"

"What if I didn't?" she said. "Who cares? Maybe I'll have this guy's kid - what'll you do then? Keep on with this pathetic charade? Pretend the baby's yours? You going to be one of those modern gay fathers?"

"Oh, shit," he said. "God, what have you been thinking? What do you think you know?"

"I know everything," she said.

"What do you mean, *gay fathers*?" he said.

"Don't lie to me.

"What kind of game are you playing? You told me you knew," he said. "You - you went to the *Underground*, saw her."

"David?" she could feel a finger of panic tapping her on the shoulder.

"Thea, listen to me - you can't do this. The doctor told me it was probably her - I finally tracked her down, a couple of weeks ago, at the *Underground* - I can't believe she did it, but I got her to take the test."

Thea wanted to stop him now, split his head open, look inside. She wanted to know what he was thinking before he hurled some sharp projectile, wiped her out. "You're crazy," she said, took a step to leave the room.

"It was negative, Thea. It wasn't her - all along, it was-"

She was suddenly struck by the word - *her*. "She," she said. "Her?" She couldn't move, the finger making its way down her spine.

"The girl-" he was trying to revive her.

She said nothing.

"You really have no idea, do you?" David's eyes were sucking her in, disarming

her. They were the eyes of a little boy who'd been locked in a room for a long time, had climbed out of the attic, found out the inhabitant of the house had no idea he had been up there. Bitterness turning to absolute disbelief. Tears were draining from his eyes, but he didn't make a sound.

Thea was paralysed.

"The guys - the ones I went to school with," he spoke slowly, enunciating carefully, a doctor talking to a mental patient.

"They had a party for me - before the wedding. We went to a bunch of clubs, *the Underground*. There was a girl - "

"You had sex with a girl?"

"I had to get a blood test - in the middle of June - for the firm, the insurance company. That's why I wanted to move - to Vancouver, when I found out - there was something wrong with the cells - they tested them. It took, like three weeks, and I thought *that* was hell - the waiting."

She was up in the corner of the room, observing, unable to touch this man who stood two feet in front of herself.

"I hated myself - I thought it was the girl - I was so drunk. It made me sick, thinking about it."

She sank to the floor, sat there in a heap, in front of him.

He was on his knees, grabbing her arms. "But it wasn't - and I've never had a transfusion - this was my first sexual relationship- Jesus, Thea, I'm H.I.V positive."

"Stop - please." It was a little girl crying, an old woman, tired of life, walking out into the back yard, hunching along.

"The doctor said - he said - Thea -

He pushed her out there, with the dead things, the decrepit geraniums in the flower bed. It was his fault.

"He said I could have got it from you."

Stupid Love Poem

I will give you your stupid love poem
introduce your woman to her saviour
set them
dancing
to music
the music in *your* head
not the melody of rhyme
because that would be too stupid
-even for me.
I will set them dancing
avoiding the cracks
that might break
their mother' s backs,
send them to dance in the garden
where the snow has settled
making it easier
to explain
the accident
that befalls your woman
glass slippers lending little lenience
quite stupid, really
-for them to glide over the ice
without considering how easy it is
to slip
into a coma
after falling
head splitting
open no rings there
inside her head
like when an axe cleaves a tree
no traces of meditation, scars of
experience - sap of knowledge.
They couldn't have known
when they fashioned the slippers,
didn't think
the glass might sear
her flesh, skin blistering,
instantly shatter
when booted with the blade of figuring
-skating icy reality, strokes cutting
deep patterns, turning
out frailty - human flesh.
But she will not have to worry
one shoe escaping during the spill
splicing off the ice, splintering
the sound changing the tone,
setting him off balance - arms
flaying
sending him pirouetting right

into the broken instrument,
cutting his hands to ribbons
blood freezing, dribbling into icicles
crystalline threads - chords really
screaming,
glittering like harp strings
in the sunlit pages of fairy tales.